

FROM OLD COUNTRY
BUMPKIN
TO **MASTER**
SWORDSMAN

My
Hotshot Disciples
Are All Grown Up
Now, and They
Won't Leave
Me Alone

1 Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

Tetsuhiro Nabeshima



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THE YOUNG ACE
OF THE MAGIC CORPS



FICELLE HABELER

THE LIBERION ORDER'S
SYMBOL OF CHEERFULNESS



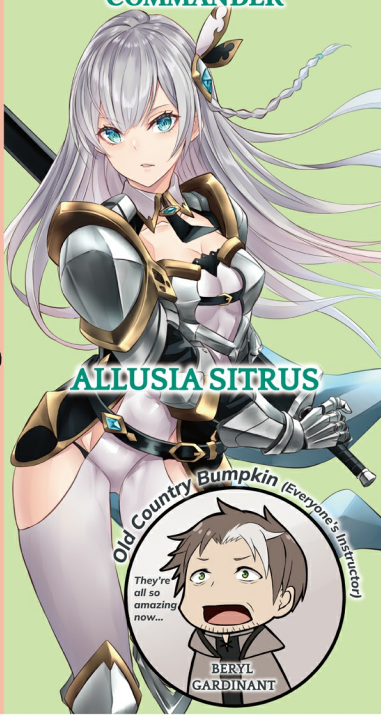
KEWLNY CRUCIELLE

THE BLACK RANK
ADVENTURER



SELNA LYSANDRA

THE NOBLE KNIGHT
COMMANDER



ALLUSIA CITRUS



Seriously, how did it come to this?
I'm just a boring old country bumpkin.
But at this point,
it's not like I could do anything to stop the challenge.
I had to, at the very least, put in enough effort
to avoid humiliating myself if I lost.

Concentrate.



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Chapter 1: An Old Country Bumpkin Goes to the Capital

Early in the morning, in a dojo in the middle of the remote countryside, my dad started muttering some incomprehensible crap.

“Beryl. When am I finally gonna get some grandkids?”

“What’re you expecting from me out here in the sticks, pops?”

My name’s Beryl Gardinant—I’m an old man. Leaving out the details, I’ve long served as the instructor at a rural swordsmanship dojo that’s been going strong for generations. You might think I’ve omitted the specifics, but there’s nothing else to say. I’m simply an old man in a backcountry dojo who teaches students how to wield a sword. Nothing more and nothing less.

“It’s your day off, and you start meditating first thing in the morning. You’re not gonna meet anyone acting like that.”

“Weren’t you the one who raised me this way?”

Ever since dad retired and yielded the seat of instructor to me, this kind of nonsense was all he ever had to say. Though, he wasn’t alone in thinking that way—I wanted to meet someone too, dammit.

My family being what it was, I’d spent my life messing around with a wooden sword, practically for as long as I could remember. My parents had given birth to a healthy boy, and they’d raised me well, but it seemed I hadn’t inherited my dad’s outstanding talent for the blade. I had, of course, put in the effort. It wasn’t like I hated swordsmanship or anything. And above all else, I’d been unable to find any other immersive hobbies out here in the countryside.

When I started my training as a child, I was filled with curiosity. This extended to the peak of adolescence, through my teens and into my twenties, when my maturity caught up to my physical growth and enriched both my mind and body. Then, in my thirties, I further devoted myself to personal improvement. And with all that accumulation of experience, I’d reached my forties, having

poured more effort into my training than was typical.

However, all I'd acquired as a result were somewhat better sword skills than the average person, a physique that at least allowed me to call myself a swordsman, and a reaction speed that could be considered keen for my age. That was about it.

If asked whether I was satisfied with this, I'd have to say no. But I wasn't particularly disgruntled about it either. This was the end of my road—I was strangely convinced of that fact. Maybe I felt that way because my dad had allowed me to grow and grow without pinning too many hopes on my skills.

"Don't you have at least one nice girl among your pupils?"

"Come on, pops. The dojo ain't a place to pick up girls."

I once more dismissed my dad's nonsense grumbling. He was likely only acting this way because he was talking to his own son, but frankly, his tact was still pretty lacking.

Incidentally, maybe out of consideration for his old age, my dad had yielded the dojo's ownership to me. Since then, I'd come to realize something: while I was only so-so with a sword, it seemed I had quite a knack for teaching others.

Even though our village was under the protection of the nation, there were many dangers in the backcountry. Take one step beyond our settlement's fenced boundary, and you'd find yourself in wildland, home to ferocious animals and dangerous monsters alike. Of course, it was rare for monsters to come all the way to the village, but the world out here was still far from safe.

The capital and other urban areas were protected by splendid walls and patrolled by knights and soldiers. However, in this rural village, our defensive options were more limited. There were guys like me—an average swordsman trying to put food on the table by running a dojo—and then some hunters who delved into the wilds. Occasionally, soldiers, adventures, and the like would stay for some time, but that was about all we had.

Maybe that was why, despite being out in the sticks, our instruction was in relatively high demand. People wanted to acquire a means to protect themselves and learn skills that could lead to a successful career. Unfortunately,

magic was foreign to me. I didn't know the first thing about it. From the moment of my birth, I'd only wielded wooden and metal swords. Though, even across the entire world, wizards capable of using magic were a rarity. The capital apparently garrisoned a magic corps, but wizards were exceedingly few in number.

Oh, right—on the topic of pupils, I'd once taught a pretty girl with glistening silver hair. She'd once looked at me, her eyes earnest, and said, "When I grow older, I'm going to marry you, Master." Unfortunately, she'd been too young for me to take her declaration seriously, so I'd just let it go.

Ah, we've gone off track. I'd been talking about teaching swordsmanship and how I was a little bit talented as an instructor. With a good balance of supply and demand, my dojo had quite a few pupils, despite being nestled out in the country. We taught all kinds—rowdy local kids, the village headman's daughter, and even nobles from the capital, along with their children. I did sometimes think that there had to be countless other dojos like mine out there, but in any case, the number of students we had was directly tied to my family's standard of living. We charged a monthly tuition fee, after all. The dojo definitely wasn't running as some kind of charitable enterprise.

"Well, you know, it's about time for you to show me some filial piety," my dad griped.

"I inherited your dojo, enrolled more pupils, and am making us more money. What do you call that if not filial piety?"

"Add grandkids to that."

"Oh come on..."

He was seriously energetic first thing in the morning.

Anyway, I'd been serving as the instructor here for a good while now. Among the graduates from our dojo, some had found significant success in life by becoming high-ranking adventurers or members of the nation's knightly orders.

Some former students came back to the dojo pretty frequently to report on how things were going, while others sent letters. Though I had some talent for teaching, I was fully aware of my own abilities. I was grateful—it made me feel

warm and fuzzy when my old pupils fussed over me like that—but a part of me thought they didn't really need to pay attention to an old country bumpkin.

I mean, why's the commander of the nation's knights sending letters to me? Doesn't she have more important things to do? Getting updates from such a VIP, one that was far beyond my station, made me understand that some of my pupils had really made it big. Overall, it was pretty bad for my heart.

If only I'd possessed a little more talent for the sword, then maybe, just maybe, I would've left this village too.

"You can at least give me a li'l hope, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. If I ever meet anyone, that is."

At any rate, leaving here was no more than an impossible dream. I knew my abilities were at their limit, so at this age, I didn't even entertain the idea.

After my dad left the dojo, I felt a clean breeze brush against my skin. It was the perfect morning for meditation.

"Haaah..."

I gradually focused my mind inward, but I was pulled right back out when I heard what sounded like a visitor. Hmm, who could that be? Today was a day off, so it probably wasn't any of my pupils. Besides, pretty much all of my current students were children, so they were more likely to charge in without giving a proper greeting.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, yes, who is it?"

I stood up—my hips had seemed to grow heavier and heavier over the years—and opened the dojo's door. Standing outside was a beauty with dignified features. Her long silver hair fluttered behind her.

"It's been a long time, Master."

"Umm, are you perhaps...Allusia?"

Her noble expression loosened into a gentle smile. "Yes, Master. It's good to see you again."



Right. So why in the world was the great commander of this nation's knights all the way out here in the sticks? Seriously, why? Showing up in person like this was obviously going to shock an old man.

Barely keeping those thoughts to myself, I said, "It really has been a long time. I hardly recognized you."

"You haven't changed at all, Master."

I suddenly found myself in a boy-meets-girl situation in a countryside dojo. How easy life would be if I could only sum it up like that? However, I was far too old to be considered a boy, and Allusia wasn't so young that she could be called a girl. She was still a beauty, though. I was unfortunately past the age where I could live with such romantic dreams in my head.

In the north of the Glean continent was our nation, the Liberis Kingdom. The capital city was called Baltrain—there, the Liberion Order, which directly served the monarchy, had its headquarters.

And now, the new commander of said Liberion Order, Allusia Citrus, was standing before me.

During her time at our dojo, she'd been diligent and talented, possessing a gentle personality. As a little girl, she'd been good enough to replicate my swordsmanship by watching and imitating me. She'd also had a talent for taking care of others—I remembered that she used to trouble herself with her fellow pupils. All in all, she'd been really put together, which had seemed so refreshingly mismatched to this dojo in the middle of nowhere.

Allusia had attended my dojo for a period of about four years. In terms of age, she'd been here from twelve to sixteen, and during that time, she'd absorbed pretty much everything I could teach her. Looking to further devote herself to her improvement, she'd left this remote region—the village of Beaden—and had made her way to the capital, Baltrain.

"It's been quite a while since I visited the dojo," she muttered, a clear air of nostalgia in her voice. "The same goes for Beaden..." She peered past me, looking inside the dojo from the entrance.

"You're right. How many years has it been now?"

Allusia hadn't been born in this village. After hearing rumors about our dojo from somewhere or other, she'd made her way to Beaden along with her parents. According to what I'd heard, her parents were merchants, and their nice clothes had offered a glimpse of their wealth. They'd apparently wanted their beloved daughter to acquire the bare minimum skills needed to protect herself. One thing had led to another, and they'd extended their stay, allowing her to attend our dojo for four years.

Of course, it was strange for the daughter of merchants to become a knight commander. I had no clue how that'd happened. Incidentally, I wasn't one to pry regarding my pupils' birthplaces and such. If they were minors, I verified what I had to, but fundamentally, I never refused anyone who came to our doorstep. As long as they paid the monthly tuition fee, I had no complaints.

"Oh, yes, have you been reading my letters?" Allusia asked.

"Yeah, I have. Looks like you've been enjoying a good life."

Ever since leaving the dojo, she'd sent me letters once every few months. By reading them, I'd been able to catch a glimpse of her day-to-day. I hadn't, however, gotten the slightest inkling that she'd pay me a sudden in-person visit. Actually, if she'd been planning to drop by, I would've preferred that she inform me in one of her letters. Having such a big shot show up on my doorstep out of the blue was a huge shock for this old man.

She'd grown so much compared to my last memory of her. After giving it some thought, I figured that Allusia was now in her midtwenties—she was likely approaching the age of enrichment in both mind and body. She seemed to have quieted down a lot compared to the young girl I'd first met, even giving off a tranquil impression. Her facial features were more dignified than before, and her body was now that of a woman. It showed how healthily she'd grown since leaving the dojo.

As I observed my former pupil, my eyes fixed on the weapon at her hip. "I see you still have that sword..."

"Yes. It's the precious blade you honored me with, Master."

Allusia wasn't currently wearing the gallant armor of a knight commander. Clad in a leather jacket, her garb was much more casual. Regardless, she kept a

sword at her waist as a symbol of her duty—and it was a blade I recognized. I’d given it to her as a farewell gift when she’d left the dojo.

“I’m pretty sure a knight commander can easily get her hands on a much nicer sword,” I said.

“The definition of a good sword differs from person to person. This one’s good for me. This is *my* sword.”

“I see...”

Oh man. That made me happy, but it was still a bit much to hear. Realizing that my former pupil held such unexpectedly heavy emotions for her sword weirded me out a tiny bit. Still, I guess it wasn’t bad that she had an attachment to my farewell gift.

Pretty much all the kids who graduated from my dojo received a sword. I would’ve preferred to get them a nicer blade, but unfortunately, we didn’t have a stash of high-quality swords out here in the sticks. There was a limit to both quantity and quality, after all. We had a blacksmith in the village, but his skills and equipment were that of a so-so village smith, so I couldn’t expect masterworks from him.

I didn’t remember how many people I’d given swords to, exactly. I’d basically handed them out willy-nilly as farewell gifts. If I saw a former student with one of my swords in person, maybe I’d be able to identify them, but I wasn’t sure—if, like with Allusia, it’d been years since they’d been at the dojo, it would probably take me some time to remember. After all, more pupils meant more money, and I’d made enough money to fund ordering and gifting swords to all of them. It was no surprise that I couldn’t immediately recall every last student.

“S-So? What brings you here today?” I asked. “I don’t believe you ever mentioned anything about stopping by.”

Casting aside my idle thoughts, I focused on Allusia once more. I tried recalling the content of her letters, but I couldn’t remember her mentioning that she was planning a visit. Or, maybe I could. Now that I thought about it, she had written something like, “Now that I have the opportunity to speak with pivotal figures of the nation, like nobles, I’m working a lot more. However, good things have happened too. Please look forward to it.”

I'd figured she would send a follow-up report in another letter, but here she was in person. It was far beyond my expectations.

"Oh, right," she said. "As a matter of fact, there's something I simply must inform you of."

"H-Hmm. What's that?"

She maintained her smile. Actually, it seemed even deeper than before. It was a truly refreshing smile, without a hint of shadow hanging over it; however, after the ebb and flow of heavy emotions regarding her farewell sword, a part of me sensed something unsettling hiding beneath. Maybe it was just my imagination.

Anyway, what good news might she want to tell me face-to-face? Hmm, I couldn't even begin to guess. If she'd gotten promoted even further, that was exactly the type of thing to notify me of by letter. But since she was here in person, it probably had something to do with me too—what matter could possibly involve an old man in his forties who lived out here in the sticks?

"To tell the truth, in addition to my duties as the knight commander, I've been given the honor of serving as the order's swordsmanship instructor."

"Hmm, that's pretty impressive."

Allusia was amazing. She'd likely devoted herself to her training even more since leaving the dojo, taking her abilities to greater heights. Frankly, by becoming a knight commander, she'd already proved that she had the skills to match the title.

"Upon my appointment, I recommended you for a position as a special instructor to the order. I've now received official approval."

"Huh...?"

What did she just say? Thought I heard something weird a second ago. Ha ha ha—must be going senile in my old age.

"H-Hang on a sec. Can you repeat that?"

"Yes. I recommended you for a position as a special instructor for the order and have received approval. I've come here to inform you of such."

“Hmm?”

Why? Why a position like that? I was nothing more than an old sword teacher at a dojo out in the sticks. Why would anyone send me to Baltrain as a special instructor for knights who carried the weight of the nation on their shoulders? That was far too much of a burden for me. What a nice joke. I had thought Allusia was the serious type, so it was a surprise to see that she'd throw around a gag like this.

I decided to check just one more time. “Wait...seriously?”

“What do I achieve by lying about this?” Allusia replied, her expression turning just a little peevish. “I don't believe it's the slightest bit strange considering your strength, Master.”

Despite her assurance, I still felt like this offer couldn't be real. “So you say, but my abilities don't amount to much.”

“Again with the humility.”

It wasn't humility—I was telling the truth. It's not like I thought I was weak or anything. If I was, I wouldn't have any interest in swordsmanship, and I wouldn't be able to serve as an instructor. Still, it felt far too inappropriate for me to teach the famed knights of the Liberion Order.

I had no idea what exactly a special instructor did, but taking the title at face value, I could at least guess that it involved guiding their swordsmanship. But...teaching swordplay among the elite of the elite? Me? She had to be messing with me. This whole situation came off as a malicious prank.

“Anyway...” I continued. “I'm surprised the order approved something like this.”

Right. Say that Allusia had massively overestimated my abilities. Her recommendation alone wouldn't be enough to decide the teacher for such an important position. I had no idea how affairs related to a knightly order were managed, but at the very least, the organization wasn't so simple that she would be able to make changes at her own discretion.

The fact that I'd been successfully approved meant that someone, maybe even the organization itself, had seriously considered Allusia's

recommendation. An enormous part of me wanted them to rescind this decision right away. However, the fact that they'd examined my credentials and cleared the recommendation meant that some tremendous idiot had been making the final call. Going right up to that person and giving them a good punch would be far too unrealistic, but I at least wanted to know how this had gotten approved.

"It wasn't particularly difficult," Allusia answered. "A good number of your former pupils have joined the order's ranks. Besides, your swordsmanship is rather famous. You've gained a solid reputation as the Backwater Swordmaster, the man who has turned out many famous knights and adventurers. I'd rather omit the 'Backwater' part, but...um, Beaden isn't exactly prosperous by the nicest standards, so..."

"That's real funny," I said, not a hint of amusement in my voice.

I couldn't even laugh. Who were they calling the "Backwater Swordmaster"? The first half was correct, but the second half was a major inconsistency. *I'll say it again and again: I'm nothing more than a humble instructor at a dojo.* Even if I was somewhat more skilled with a sword than the average person, I was no living legend or hero. I was just an old country bumpkin, and I couldn't possibly become a swordmaster.

But Allusia was insistent, and she seemed to be growing a bit pouty at my denial. "I keep telling you that this is neither a lie nor a jest..."

"A-Aaah, sorry. It just doesn't feel real to me."

I wasn't exactly trying to improve her mood, but she didn't seem to be lying, so at the very least, there was no point in criticizing her. Though she was, in fact, seriously guilty of something: recommending the likes of me in the first place.

"Mrgh. Master, have you grown timid since I left the dojo?" Allusia asked.

"Not at all. Now, just as before, I'm nothing more than a humble man."

She seemed to have an awfully high opinion of my skills, but that just didn't sit right with me. It didn't exactly feel *bad*, but when I thought about how she considered me to be better than I actually was...it made me fret.

“Let’s just say that everything we’ve talked about is true. What’ll happen to the dojo?” I asked. “I still have a lot of pupils. I can’t just suddenly move.”

If things had already gotten approved, I couldn’t do much about it. Still, there were many things I had to realistically consider. As mentioned, I’d been running this dojo for many years, and as an institution, this school had been going for generations. Though, because I wasn’t married, it was possible that the tradition would end with me anyway. Regardless, I couldn’t part with the dojo out of the blue. That would be far too irresponsible, and my dad wasn’t at the age to be swinging a sword around anymore.

“I know. That’s why the position is as a special instructor,” Allusia said. “There’s no need to remain stationed with the order. You can simply come to Baltrain a few times a month.”

“I-I see...” Was that really okay for a special instructor?

“So, to work out your upcoming schedule, I’d like you to come to the capital with me. A carriage is prepared for us outside the village.”

“Right now?!”

“It’s a day off for the dojo, isn’t it?”

“Ah, um, it is, but...”

She was right, but still... And also, it was a little scary that she still remembered our dojo’s schedule. Crap. Things were moving too fast. Was it really all right for me to just accept this job? Had I overlooked anything? Was it fine for me to do as Allusia had said and settle into this inexplicable special instructor position? Actually, did I even have the right to refuse an appointment from the order? How much legal force did this recommendation have?

This stream of questions dominated my mind. Allusia was fundamentally a good girl—there was no mistaking that. Even if she’d only been my student for a short four years, I could guarantee her good character. Had she always been this overbearing, though? Among my pupils, she’d been one who’d grown more emotionally attached to me. She’d been easy to teach and had absorbed everything quickly. That was exactly why I’d given her a sword as a farewell gift.

I stared at her, these vague thoughts running through my mind. Suddenly,

Allusia seemed to remember something—her expression changed, and she pulled several letters from her pocket.

“Oh, right,” she said, holding them out. “This is a letter of appointment stamped with the royal seal, and this is your employment contract.”

“Ah, yup, okay.”

No doubt about it. That right there is the king’s seal. This is the kinda thing I absolutely have to obey, dammit. No refusing it, dammit. Allusia, you little...



Surrendering myself to the clattering and shaking carriage, I peered out the window. The scenery didn’t really change as we traveled. Gently sloping plains continued alongside the road, and I caught glimpses of mountains far off in the distance. Once in a while, a river or the like freshened up the scene, but this road was a little too long to be admiring a nearly constant view. Beaden was as rural as rural got. We were able to live normal lives, and we didn’t want for anything, but you definitely couldn’t call it lively. As such, the land from the edge of the village to the beginning of the capital’s urban sprawl was nothing but identical backcountry emptiness.

“It’s been a while since I’ve visited the capital,” I mumbled out of the corner of my mouth, immediately bored by the view.

Allusia sharply picked up on my quiet remark. “You’ll have many more opportunities to do so from now on.”

She was sitting next to me, and to be honest, her profile was very picturesque. She had long silver hair and almond-shaped eyes. Her noble features made her seem like a statue that’d come to life. Compared to my last memory of her, she was far more womanly and composed...though that phrasing minimized how much she’d really grown. She’d always had good looks, but now, she was an astounding beauty. I wasn’t going to have any wicked thoughts about my former pupil, though.

My mind turned to the Liberion Order. They were famous for having an extremely strict selection test for recruits. Even living out in the sticks, I knew about it, so that just went to show how prestigious the knights were.

The order was the symbol of Liberis, so naturally, they had plenty of history and social standing. They were also the greatest military force under the kingdom's command, and taking into consideration their immense skill, they served as a deterrent in the nation's diplomatic strategy.

In terms of simple martial might, skilled mercenaries or remarkable adventurers were around the same level, but those groups weren't under the jurisdiction of the kingdom. There were also those who favored Liberis and might help the country out in a pinch, but they couldn't necessarily be relied on in a time of emergency.

A Liberion knight had a wide range of official duties, from maintaining public order in the city to subjugating large monsters. They were tremendously popular among the citizens. A large number of those who'd knocked on our dojo's door had done so aiming to join the order. Though, I didn't know how many of those had successfully gotten in.

Anyway, half the reason a bumpkin like me was so well-informed about this stuff was that publicity about the Liberion Order had reached as far as the backcountry. The other half of my knowledge had come from Allusia's letters. Each and every time I received a large bundle of paper from her, I questioned where she found the time to write so much. After all, she was the order's commander.

Because it was a hugely important organization to the country, its commander needed to have outstanding abilities, popularity, and character to suit the position. Was Allusia a woman befitting of such a heroic reputation?

"So, um, about what Mordea mentioned..." Allusia said, perhaps reading the intent of my earlier mumblings.

"Aah, he was just fooling around. Don't worry about it." Mordea was my dad's name. He was in the latter half of his sixties but was still very energetic in both body and mind. His lower back had been bothering him every now and then, though.

The trip to the capital was actually fairly lengthy—it took the carriage half a day just to get there. Even if this was a day off for the dojo, I couldn't suddenly leave the house for that long, so I'd explained the situation to my dad. There

was no point in lying, so Allusia had accompanied me to go over the details, but...

“Ha ha ha ha! Well isn’t that an honor?! Go find yourself a wife in the city while you’re at it. How about that fine beauty right next to you?”

So he’d said. He really lacked any sense of tact whatsoever. Even now, I was truly astonished at how he’d managed to bag my mom with a sense of humor like that. I knew he was worried about me living as a bachelor at my age, but trying to pair me with Allusia was pretty questionable. In terms of looks, status, and abilities, she far exceeded me in every way.

“I see... He was fooling around? I don’t really...” Allusia mumbled.

“Hm? You say something?”

“No. Don’t mind me.”

“That so? Seriously, sorry about my old man.”

After apologizing for my family’s shameful behavior, I once more directed my gaze to the scenery. Not to condone anything my dad said, but this *was* a rare trip out to Baltrain. It was probably fine for me to let loose to a certain extent.

Setting aside having a fateful romantic encounter or anything like that, it was probably best to buy my parents a souvenir or two. While I was at it, it didn’t sound like a bad idea to acquire a nice sword. I no longer had any opportunities to swing a sword aside from training, but it was still ideal to have a quality weapon. It wasn’t like I had any other real hobbies, and as a boring old man in his forties who’d only ever lived for the sword, I had nobody besides my family to buy gifts for. So, you could say I had no reason to spend money on anything else—no point in tucking away more money in my pocket than I needed.

“Oh yeah, what’re we doing once we reach the capital?” I asked.

“First, I’ll introduce you to the members of the order. After that, we’ll work out your schedule for coming in and teaching lessons. Then, if we have the time, I think I’d like you to watch a little of our training.”

“Got it. My old man will get noisy about this visit, so if we have the time, I’d like to get him a—”

She cut me off. “Let’s work out those details immediately after we arrive. I’ll guide you to the stores.”

“S-Sure.” It felt like she was answering my questions before I could even ask them. *Kinda scary...*

I was a little nervous at the opportunity to see the knights’ training so soon, but their skill wasn’t something I could get a handle on until I got there and took a look for myself. There was no stopping the hands of the clock, nor was there any way of turning them back. Leaving all future problems to the future me, I decided to focus on the fun stuff.

This was a rare opportunity to be accompanied by a tremendous beauty, one who was practically wasted on me. Honestly speaking, there were the slightest—well, actually, tremendous—hints of some pretty shady things going on, as I still wasn’t convinced that I qualified for the special instructor position. But regardless, she was my cute former pupil.

“Speaking of souvenirs, does Mordea like anything in particular?” Allusia asked.

“Yeah. Despite his age, my old man has quite the taste for steamed buns, so...”

And like that, until our carriage arrived in Baltrain, I indulged myself in meaningless banter with Allusia.



“So, Mr. Beryl Gardinant will be collaborating with us as a special instructor for the order. I expect all of you to devote yourselves to your training even more than before.”

The dignified voice I heard next to me was coming from Allusia Citrus. Unlike when we’d been chatting just moments ago, her tone now was commanding and heavy. Was this what people called a formal voice? It would be hard for me to replicate.

There were dozens—maybe over a hundred—members of the order standing before me. They all wore identical sets of gleaming silver plate armor, exerting an incredibly oppressive presence. The knights were made up of men and

women of a wide range of ages, but at a glance, none were as old as I was. That made sense. It would be difficult to be a knight in your forties when your body started to genuinely deteriorate. I'd want to spend my days lazing around in the countryside too, not on the front lines of conflict.

"Mr. Gardinant is strong enough that I'm not even worth considering as his opponent. Be sure to focus all your energy on your training."

That was really going too far, but I didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention by cutting in. I was already exposed to all their eyes—interjecting would've been far too much for me.

Even among all my pupils, Allusia was exceptionally talented and had learned very quickly. That was why I'd recognized her relatively quickly, despite how long it'd been since I'd seen her. She'd left *that* much of an impression as a pupil, though I was sure she'd long surpassed me by now.

"Master, if you would, offer a word to the knights."

After losing myself in a few moments of reminiscence, the conversation suddenly turned to me. Huh? Seriously? I hadn't come up with any kind of speech. If Allusia had expected me to speak, some advance notice would've been nice.

Not that there was any way for me to voice my complaints. So, I did just as Allusia requested. Somehow, I avoided all the eyes that were focused on me and put together a greeting.

"Uh... Just as you've heard, I am Beryl Gardinant. I don't know how much my techniques will be of use to you, but I'll do my best to provide you with what assistance I can. I look forward to working with you."

After my greeting, the knights' gazes focused even harder. *Hmm, looks like eighty percent are doubtful and twenty percent hopeful.* Among the doubtful eyes, some even surpassed skepticism and entered the realm of hostility.

Maybe it really was unreasonable to appoint me as a so-called special instructor... This old man was getting worried. Though considering everything, I also felt like it was pretty weird for any of their expressions to be hopeful. Several optimistic gazes came from vaguely familiar faces. I wasn't confident I

could identify them individually though, so considering the mood in the room, I decided not to call out to any of them. They were probably my former pupils, but it'd be embarrassing if I was wrong.

From my arrival in Baltrain, to my trip to the Liberion Order's office, to being introduced in front of everyone, everything had thus far gone smoothly. There'd been four or five knights standing guard outside the building, but as the knight commander, Allusia had gotten through by simply being recognized. For some reason, that had even extended to me, and they'd allowed me to pass without any questions. The knight commander sure was amazing.

We hadn't spent any time going around the capital after our arrival—we'd gone straight to the order's office—but just looking at the streets as we passed was enough for me to understand how prosperous this place was. There'd been plenty of pedestrian traffic on the wide, carefully paved roads, giving me a glimpse of how lively things were here. We'd parked the carriage at what I assumed to be a carriage stop, and nearby, I'd spotted what looked like souvenir shops. The plan was to have Allusia guide me there later.

It went without saying that this environment was vastly different from Beaden. It was ridiculous to compare a village in the sticks to the capital, but I just couldn't help myself.

Allusia spoke once more, and my mind snapped back to the room full of knights. "We'll be working out the training schedule," she announced. "All of you, return to your duties."

With that, the meeting was apparently over. I'd felt restless with all those eyes on me, so I was grateful that it'd ended quickly.

"Master, shall we?" Allusia said, her tone suddenly gentle.

"Aah, mm-hmm."

Apparently, she didn't feel the need to use her formal voice anymore. There'd been a certain majesty to it, which suited her well. She really had become an outstanding woman.

"C-Commander! Hang on a tick!"

Just as I thought we were going to leave this place, which looked like a central

plaza of some sort, one of the knights ran over to us in a fluster.

“Kewlny, quietly now. A knight must always remain composed.”

The knight called Kewlny gave an energetic “Yes, ma’am!” before turning toward me. She had dazzling light-brown hair cut in a short bob, and she gave off a very cheerful impression. Lookswise, she seemed to be a few years younger than Allusia. Her eyes were blue—their large and cute shape made her seem even younger and more energetic. She was far shorter than Allusia too. Quite frankly, you could call her petite. All in all, she gave off the impression of a friendly puppy. This image was something I remembered well.

“Kewlny?” I asked. “I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Yup! Long time no see, Master!”

This girl—Kewlny Crucielle—was also a graduate of our dojo. She’d only spent two years there, even less time than Allusia, but her energy and affability remained so strong in my memories that I couldn’t forget her.

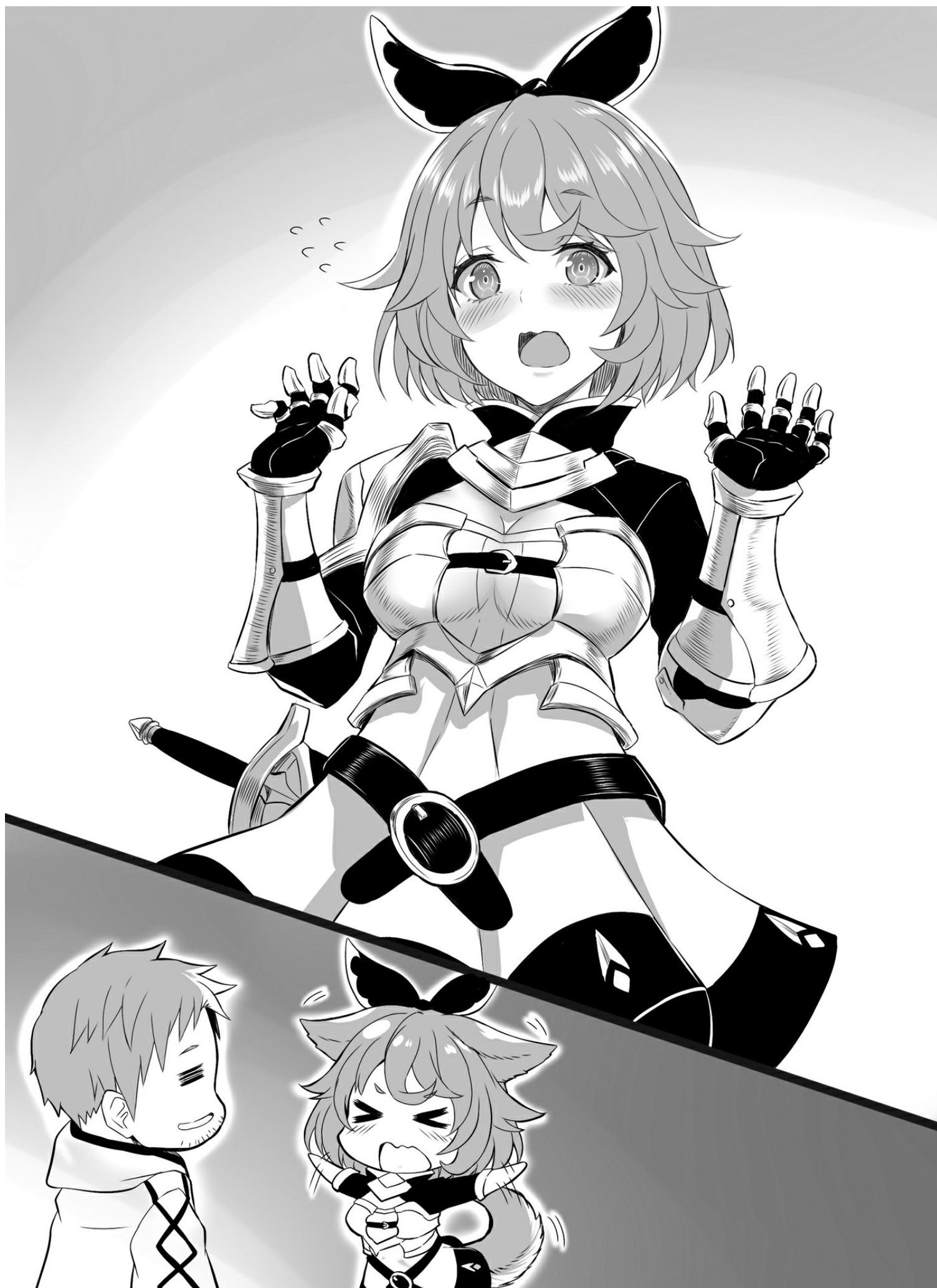
I hadn’t given her a sword as a farewell gift. She’d had a knack for swordsmanship, but two years hadn’t been enough for me to teach her everything. Though, being the order’s instructor, I would probably have the opportunity to train her personally again. If possible, it would be nice to watch her progress until I could hand her the sword I hadn’t given her back then.

“So you’ve become a splendid knight. I’m proud of you.”

“N-Not at all!” she stammered. “I’ve still got a super long way to go!”

Kewlny’s passion for joining the order had been even more apparent than Allusia’s. I clearly remembered her shouting, “I’m definitely gonna get into the Liberion Order, just you wait!” while enthusiastically devoting herself to her training. It turned out her dream had come true. I couldn’t have asked for more.

After I honestly praised her, she waved her hands about in a panic. I was vividly reminded of the familiar sight of an invisible tail wagging about. Yup. A puppy. Kewlny really was a salve for the heart.



“KewlNy, we have business to attend to. Return to your duties.”

Oh, Allusia had switched back to her formal voice. She did have a point, but...our business was to go look around for souvenirs. This old man wanted to get all the scheduling nonsense out of the way so that he could treat himself to some sightseeing.

“Ah, sorry... Master! Do you have any time later today?” KewlNy asked.

“Hm? Let’s see... If there’s time, I’d like to take a look around town,” I answered.

“Th-Then! I can go—”

“I’ll be guiding him,” Allusia said, sharply cutting her off. “KewlNy, hurry up and return to your duties.”

Why are you always jumping to your reply before people finish talking?! KewlNy is so scared! She’s like a wet puppy in the rain!

I decided to keep those thoughts to myself and instead offered some placating words. “Aah... KewlNy, that’s how it goes, so...”

I don’t really know how it goes...but I guess that’s just how it goes. Allusia’s pressure was just a little too strong. It looked like there wasn’t going to be an opportunity for the three of us to enjoy a shopping trip together.

“Erk, okay...” KewlNy’s head hung in a crestfallen manner for a moment, but then her cheerfulness took over once again. “Master! Baltrain is a great place, so enjoy yourself!”

“Yeah, thanks.” The speed at which she’d changed gears was the same as when she’d attended our dojo.

“Then Master, let’s go,” Allusia said.

“S-Sure. See you later, KewlNy.”

After parting ways with my petite former pupil, Allusia led me out of the order’s office. Baltrain’s central district, where the office was located, was home to many government facilities. We didn’t really have the time to go around at a leisurely pace today, but I did want to take a slow stroll around the

capital one day.

A short while after leaving the office with Allusia, the two of us walked over to the line of souvenir shops near the carriage stop.

“This shop handles confections and the like,” she said. “It’s fairly popular among the order too.”

“Hmm, confections? Not bad.”

Anyway, I still felt bad for Kewlmy. If I had time later, maybe it’d be nice to accompany her on a tour around town. Though, the thought kinda conjured the image of taking a dog for a walk...

“That’s Allusia for you... We’re attracting a ton of attention,” I remarked.

“The Liberion Order is very well recognized among the populace,” Allusia replied, not appearing the least bit nervous.

I could tell she was acting just like she always did—in a good way. It hadn’t been all that long a walk from the order’s office to the souvenir shops, but her beautiful looks and popularity stood out tremendously in Baltrain. A good number of the people we passed on the streets turned to look. Naturally, the majority of those gazes were filled with respect or admiration, but some were also filled with curiosity.

“Anyway, isn’t it rough walking around with someone like me?” I asked.

“Not at all. You’re overthinking things, Master.”

Most of the curious attention was directed at me. I understood why—the well-known knight commander of the Liberion Order was walking around with a boring old man. It was bound to attract attention. No one tried to strike up a conversation, but I felt a good number of curious eyes on us, even as we perused the souvenir shops.

“This is pretty much a da—”

“Hm? You say something?” I asked.

“No. Nothing. Ah, what about this?” Allusia pointed at some baked goods. I’d apparently imagined her mumbling next to me.

“Let’s see... Hm, looks tasty enough, and it should keep for a while.”

They were nice little desserts and seemed like the kind of stuff both my mom and dad would enjoy. They also scored highly for being relatively cheap. I couldn’t possibly go wrong with Allusia’s recommendation either. Not that I cared much.

With that quickly settled, I called out to the shopkeeper, “Excuse me! I’ll have two of these.”

“Right away! Thanks for the business!” he replied energetically, quickly putting the goods in a bag while stealing glances at me and Allusia.

As I thought, a beauty of her caliber was really mismatched with such an old man.

After paying up and wondering what to do next, I figured I’d go and look for a sword or something. After all, we had the time. Suddenly, from behind us...

“To think, the nation’s great knight commander is out shopping with a man. My, how you’ve fallen.”

The voice was awfully hostile. Allusia also seemed to hear it, and the two of us turned around pretty much simultaneously.

“Lysandra...” Allusia murmured. “What do you want?”

“Oh, nothing really. I was just thinking about how much spare time you must have.” The woman named Lysandra maintained her haughty attitude. As she continued to glare at Allusia, both her tone and expression remained overbearing and hostile.

I looked her over. She was taller than Allusia—her height was actually comparable to mine. That made her pretty tall for a woman. Her scarlet hair was like a blaze, and it was cut at shoulder length. Matching that, her red eyes flared with light, much like a roaring fire. Her beauty was that of someone with an unyielding spirit. To put it bluntly, she was like a handsome man with breasts.

She had two wide scabbards hanging from her waist, likely housing broadswords. Did this mean she was a practitioner of a dual-sword style? That

was pretty rare. Her breastplate seemed to heavily favor practicality, and while it didn't have the splendor of a Liberion Knight's armor, it gave her the bearing of a warrior. Also adorning her chest was a black plate that signified her status.

On the Galean continent, there was an occupation known as adventuring. People who did this for a living fell under the jurisdiction of an organization called the adventurer's guild, which spanned borders and covered an even wider breadth of activities than knightly orders. From errands for the common populace, to escorting merchants, to exterminating monsters, to investigating ruins and dungeons, to even going on quests in unknown lands, adventurers traveled all over the world without being confined to the concept of national identity. Being an adventurer could be numbered among the most sought-after dream jobs in the world.

Not everyone was capable of chasing that dream, however. The guild assigned ranks based on an adventurer's abilities. Fundamentally, it was impossible to take on a quest higher than your rank. This was to prevent people from getting heavily wounded or dying from attempting something beyond their capabilities. The only way to raise your rank was the slow and steady way: by finishing jobs and passing a promotion exam set by the guild.

From lowest to highest, those ranks were white, bronze, silver, gold, platinum, ocean, and black. I glanced at the woman's plate once more, and my eyes widened. *Black! Seriously?! Black plate!* This was my first time seeing someone of this rank in person. Lysandra was super strong.

Adventurers had dropped by Beaden before, but the highest rank we'd ever seen in the sticks was gold. There were very few adventurers at ocean ranks or above to begin with, and they tended to travel all over the world handling the toughest jobs. It was pretty much impossible to spot one randomly.

"Can you stop trying to find faults in me?" Allusia said. "I properly fulfill my professional duties."

"Hmph. I wonder about that. You can't see any of the world when you're holed up in the capital all the time, you know?"

Their conversation kept escalating, though they ignored me completely. It seemed this Lysandra woman didn't see Allusia—or rather, the order itself—in a

good light. I didn't know why that was, but I wanted a little sympathy for being stuck between what were probably two of the strongest swordswomen in the world. The pressure I felt coming off them was nothing to laugh at.

"We don't exactly have time to lounge around here. Master, let's go," Allusia said. She didn't seem keen on putting up with this and likely wanted to bring the conversation to an early end.

"S-Sure," I replied. I didn't really enjoy being glared at by a black rank adventurer anyway, so I obediently went along with her.

"Hmph, it looks like you pulled this man off the streets. Why're you calling him your mas...ter?"

For the first time since she'd shown up, Lysandra's eyes met mine. The sharp glare she'd been directing our way rapidly turned to one of bewilderment and confusion.

Huh? What? Had I done something? I was pretty sure I hadn't. I was just here to buy baked goods. There was no reason to make any kind of face at me.

"Huh? Um... Master...Beryl...?"

"What?"

Hang on. I wasn't acquainted with any handsome hunks who happened to have breasts.

In the spur of the moment, I stammered out, "Y-You must be mistaken..." I knew immediately that it hadn't been the right thing to say—it was pretty rude to accuse someone of that when they saw your face and called you by name.

"N-No! There's no way I'd mistake you for someone else!" Lysandra insisted, running up to me.

Whoa. Crap. I seriously had no memory of her. Since she was calling me "Master," she must have studied under *someone*, but I didn't remember ever teaching swordsmanship to such a lively-looking woman. She was probably, no, definitely mistaken. Beryl was a pretty common name, so she must've been thinking of someone else.

More importantly, the pressure of being so close to the highest rank of

adventurer was overwhelming. Her face drew close. It felt like my knees were going to buckle.

“Sorry, I don’t recall anyone like you,” I said.

“N-No way... You don’t remember me...?” Lysandra asked, her bewildered eyes now colored with a hint of despair.

Not that there was anything I could do when she looked at me like that—I simply had no memory of her.

“It’s been twenty years already... But still...!” Lysandra mumbled, slumping her shoulders.

Twenty years... That was pretty long ago. It was just around the time I’d risen to the position of instructor at the dojo, so someone else must’ve also taught her. After all, at that time, I’d been so desperate to do well at my new teaching position.

As I thought back on such things, Lysandra grabbed my shoulders firmly.

“Master, it’s me,” she said, her voice quiet but her expression frantic. “It’s Selna Lysandra. Do you remember picking up a shabby child long ago and teaching her how to use a sword?”

“Hmm?”

A shabby child...? Selna?

“Ah.”

Was she... Could she be...?

It had, in fact, happened just around twenty years ago. One day, when I’d been patrolling around the village, I’d discovered a small child covered in wounds, dragging her leg as she struggled toward the village. There’d been no adults in sight. Judging that this was no trivial matter, I’d taken her in, but with no guardians to contact, I’d ended up raising her for a while.

Our dojo had trained quite a lot of pupils during my dad’s age, so we’d had some leeway with our expenses. It hadn’t been a problem for us to raise a child. Plus, it wasn’t like we could’ve just abandoned her, and seeing how I didn’t have any kids of my own, my parents had fawned over her quite a lot.

I figured that she'd been the daughter of some merchant or traveler. The wounds she'd suffered hadn't been from a squabble or anything—they'd come from monsters or wild beasts. In this age, while such a thing wasn't exactly commonplace, it wasn't all that rare either—especially out in the country.

The girl had been in really low spirits, so as a change of pace, I'd had her join the kids at the dojo to take lessons. She'd been so docile. When I'd asked her name, the only thing she'd said in return was "Selna."

Still, she'd taken an interest in the sword and had faithfully devoted herself to my instruction. I hadn't seriously intended to train her, but having lost her parents, she'd had nothing else to throw herself into. The sight of her tackling something so passionately, as if she'd been trying to shake off the sorrows of her past, had brought a tear to my eye.

She'd spent about three years in my care. During a trip to the capital, my dad had talked to an organization that handled such cases. For a while, after she left the dojo, I'd prayed that she had gotten adopted and would live a good life.

All of this had happened a good while before Allusia had started attending our dojo.

"Are you maybe...*that* Selna?" I asked.

"Yes! The same Selna you picked up and taught how to use a sword!" she replied, her expression brightening in an instant.

Seriously? There was no telling how one thing could lead to another in this world, huh?

"Man, I didn't recognize you at all," I said. "I've met a few of my pupils since coming here, including Allusia, but you're totally beyond recognition."

I figured she'd be living a modest life in the capital. Never had I imagined that she might become an adventurer who traveled all over the world. It was a big shock for this old man. What's more, as a child, she'd been such a docile girl. It felt like admiring flowers in the garden would've suited her better than fighting, so it was beyond surprising that she'd ended up looking like a ferocious lion.

"I wanted to visit Beaden and report back to you, but once I started working as an adventurer, I was never blessed with the opportunity..." Selna said. "I

never thought we'd be reunited like this."

"Don't let it bother you," I said. "I'm just glad to see you're doing well."

The pressure Selna exuded remained as strong as ever, but knowing who she was bolstered my emotions enough to handle it. Incidentally, I was hoping she would let go of my shoulders already.

"At any rate, why are you in Baltrain, Master?" Selna asked.

"Aah, about—"

"Lysandra," Allusia cut in. "Starting today, Master Beryl has been appointed as a special instructor for the Liberion Order. He is scheduled to help with the order's training. As such, unhand him immediately."

Allusia! Why do you keep cutting people off and answering for them?! Well, her explanation was right, so that part was fine, but still...



“Master Beryl...training the Liberion Order...?”

“That’s right. I even have an appointment letter with the royal seal,” Allusia said.

Ow! Ow! Ow! Selna tightened her grip on my shoulders. Her strength was abnormal, living up to her reputation as a black rank adventurer. I really wanted her to let go.

Mostly because of Selna, the souvenir shop had suddenly been enveloped in a dangerous atmosphere. My sympathies went to the shopkeeper. It wasn’t really my fault or anything, but I just felt like I needed to apologize.

Selna glanced at the letter. “Tch. The royal seal? Looks like it isn’t fake, I guess.”

“What could I accomplish by lying about this?”

“S-Selna, can you let go?” I requested.

At this rate, things were going to get pretty bad...in all sorts of ways. I mean, for the last little while, Selna had been extremely close to me. She had the looks of an androgynous beauty, but from the point of view of my mental state, I was a small animal being glared at by a ferocious monster.

“A-Aah. Forgive me, Master. I wasn’t thinking,” Selna said, finally releasing me.

Well, I suppose reuniting with someone after so many years, only for them not to remember you, would be a pretty big shock. Still, to put it bluntly, she’d changed too much. It would’ve been stranger if I’d been able to figure out who she was at a glance.

“Master, now that you’re in the capital, please pay a visit to the adventurer’s guild too,” Selna said. “I’ll be able to accommodate you in all sorts of ways. If you’d like, I can even guide you there.”

Allusia shook her head. “No. He’ll be going around town with me after this, so there’s no space for you to butt in, Lysandra.”

“What? You’ve already appointed him as that special instructor or whatever you call it. You’ll be able to see him plenty after today. I, on the other hand, just

reconnected with him after so many years, so the role of his escort should fall to me.”

“No. It’s been a while since he’s been to the capital, so he doesn’t have any knowledge of the area. It only makes sense for the order, who run their operations from the capital, to be the ones to guide him.”

For some reason, Allusia and Selna were now rapidly arguing without pausing to breathe.

Someone save me.



“Anyway, I’m surprised you became an adventurer,” I said.

“Hee hee, it came as a surprise to me too,” Selna replied. “My current parents treat me well, but I realized a while back that I had to put the sword skills you taught me to use.”

“Lysandra, you’re too close,” Allusia cut in.

“Speak for yourself,” Selna retorted. “You’re all over him.”

“N-Now, now,” I stammered. “Let’s not fight.”

I had Allusia on the right and Selna on the left. Most people would call this having a flower in each hand, but I felt more like a tiny animal surrounded by wild beasts. The pressure crushing me from both sides was intense.

The three of us were walking together now. After leaving the souvenir shop, I’d mentioned wanting to look for a sword—this had led to Allusia and Selna arguing over who would introduce me to their favorite blacksmith.

I was, in fact, glad to see Selna again after so long. As such, I couldn’t really bring myself to part ways with her immediately. Unlike the knights who were stationed in the capital, it was rare to be able to meet with an adventurer who traveled (quite literally) all over the world. This was even more true for a black rank. Having apparently finished a request in faraway lands, Selna had returned to Baltrain, and she just so happened to have free time today. I’d ended up asking if she wanted to come along.

It would be a waste of time to fight over who should be guiding me around. I

also wanted to return to Beaden within the day, so time was of the essence. However, having been so desperate to calm things down initially, I'd overlooked one factor.

"People are really staring..." Selna muttered, brushing back her red hair. "Well, I guess that makes sense."

Yup, that was it. I'd been the one to suggest that we all go together, so I could only blame myself for being so thoughtless.

"I can't get used to people's eyes on us like that..." I muttered.

"Master, one day, such eyes will be directed at you alone," said Allusia.

Selna nodded. "Though I resent it, I agree with Citrus. Once word of your great tutelage spreads, you'll be drowning in this level of attention everywhere you go."

"Ha ha ha..."

The way they put me on a pedestal was insane. Great tutelage? What a good joke. I wasn't anything that amazing, just a boring old country bumpkin. These two probably wouldn't listen to me if I told them that, though.

I casually glanced around. All I saw were eyes, eyes, and more eyes fixed on us. The knight commander of the Liberion Order and a black rank adventurer—both top-class in terms of abilities and looks—were waiting on some geezer. *Yeah, that's bound to attract everyone's attention.*

I could hear people muttering, "It's Knight Commander Allusia," and "Ain't that Twin Dragonblade Lysandra?" and "Who's that old guy between them?" It was pretty overwhelming.

Selna had a crazy nickname too. Twin Dragonblade? So cool. As expected, she really did fight with two swords. I hadn't taught her anything like that, so wasn't her current strength completely unrelated to my tutelage?

"The blacksmith I'll be introducing you to is the order's purveyor," Allusia said. "All of his works are of high quality, so we procure pretty much every piece of equipment from him."

"H-Hmm. I'm looking forward to it."

While I endured the inquisitive eyes from the passersby, we'd apparently arrived at Allusia's recommended blacksmith. With my mind so occupied, I couldn't even recall the path we'd taken to get here. Was this really all right?

"Ooh, if it isn't Lady Citrus."

"Good day. I'd like to take a look at some swords."

"Of course, of course."

A muscular and affable smith peeked out from the workshop in the back alongside someone who appeared to be his apprentice.

"Oh yes, we got our hands on some quality ore recently," said the smith.

"I see. Then, as you've offered previously, the order would like that ore to be used in the forging of our equipment."

Being the knights' purveyor was no lie. Allusia and the blacksmith started chatting about something in a lively manner. I also noted that he didn't seem to be curious about why the three of us were here together. *Maybe he's used to having visits from bigwigs.* Regardless, I was grateful for that. Such scrutinizing gazes were painful for this old man to handle, after all.

"Hmm... This is quite the blade." I picked up one of the swords decorating the shop. It felt hefty in my hand but was very well-balanced, making the weight pleasant to handle. It was terrifically sharp too. The exquisite craftsmanship matched Allusia's praise of the blacksmith's work.

"Master, I see you still favor a longsword," Selna remarked, watching me have a face-off with the blade in my hand.

"Yeah." I held up the sword. "It's suitable for teaching, and above all else, easy to handle."

I was a rugged man at heart, so there was a time when I'd admired big two-handers like bastard swords or dual-wielded twin blades like the ones Selna used. Yet despite trying each style, in the end, I'd settled on the longsword. The balance and length of the blade felt just right. And, the skills needed to wield one were versatile—put another way, when you know how to use a longsword, you're capable of applying those skills to pretty much any other sword.

The blacksmith wrapped up his conversation with Allusia, then turned to me. “Would you like to test the edge?”

Hm, a test slash, huh? Holding a nice blade did make you want to try using it. This blacksmith understood a swordsman’s feelings. His timing was perfect too—he was a damn good businessman.

“I can give it a test swing in your shop?” I asked. “If so, I accept the kind offer.”

“Yes, there’s a space for that in the back. Right this way.”

Given the chance, I really wanted to try it out, so I let the blacksmith string me along. We made our way to the back of the building.

“Master Beryl’s swordsmanship...” Allusia murmured. “It’s been a while since I’ve witnessed it.”

“Same here,” Selna agreed.

The two of them followed as if it were perfectly natural for them to do so.

Please don’t. I seriously don’t want my swordsmanship evaluated by the knight commander of the Liberion Order and a black rank adventurer...

Not that I could say that out loud. I was too scared.

The blacksmith led me to a large area in the back where several straw posts stood in a row. This probably also served as a place to test his own swords once they were complete. “Over there,” he said, pointing. “Please, go right ahead.”

“Thank you. Now then...”

Concentrate.

I held the sword straight in front of me, standing face-to-face with the straw post. A sword’s cutting edge was proportional to its wielder’s force of will.

Thinner. Thinner. Taper my spirit to its very limit.

I waited for the ripples in my mind to level out completely.

“Shah!”

My sharply tapered spirit rode the blade, and the sword passed through the

post like a kitchen knife through tofu. The upper half of the post fell to the ground without putting up even a tiny bit of resistance.

Mm, so-so!

Having a well-made sword really was nice. The feedback I got from it was on a different level, and it was the right weight for me and everything. Despite only swinging it once, I was pleased. I considered buying it on the spot.

“As I’d expect, Master.”

“How wonderful. To think, you’re *this* good.”

Oh, I’d forgotten that those two were with me. Well, being able to let go of my surroundings and focus on swordsmanship was the whole point of concentrating. I hadn’t even registered that they were watching, but there wasn’t much I could do about that now.

“I mean, anyone with a modicum of interest in swordplay is capable of this much, right?” I asked.

These two really did praise me too much. All I’d done was cut a simple straw post. I wouldn’t go as far as saying that anyone who’d ever swung a sword around would be capable of it...but this was still a simple matter for someone with a bit of talent. Fortunately, I possessed that small bit of talent, and I had my dad to thank for that.

“Anyone can cut a straw post, yes,” said Allusia. “However, to do so this cleanly...”

Selna nodded. “It’s just as Citrus says. I don’t recall ever witnessing such a perfectly clean cross section.”

“Oh, come on—you two are buttering me up too much.”

Their excessive praise was making me bashful. I’d managed to concentrate well today, so even by my standards, the slice hadn’t been too bad. Still, I honestly couldn’t see how it was as wonderful as they said.

“Haaah...” Allusia seemed to judge that they weren’t going to get anywhere by arguing with me, so she turned to the blacksmith. “How would you rate his swordsmanship, sir?”

Now that I think about it, he was watching too. I glanced over. Said blacksmith was staring, his eyes unfocused and his mouth stuck half-open. Was he okay? I was starting to get a little worried.

“Aaah...” After several seconds of silence, he managed to squeeze out a question. “Are you a famed swordmaster from afar?”

No, dammit! I keep saying I’m just a boring old country bumpkin!



“Okay then, Master. I’ll see you another day.”

“Mm. Thanks for today, Allusia.”

We’d arrived back at the carriage stop in Baltrain. After expressing my thanks to the knight commander for attending to me for the whole day, I boarded a carriage.

Following the visit to Allusia’s recommended blacksmith, Selna had wanted to guide me to a certain smith who had ties with the adventurer’s guild. Unfortunately, there hadn’t been enough time. If I’d stayed any later, I wouldn’t have been able to get a carriage ride home.

Even if public order was relatively good in the vicinity of the capital, spending several hours on a rural nighttime road still posed a significant risk. Normally, a carriage would have an escort accompanying it after dark. But if you skipped out on the escort fee, it was possible to encounter bandits, stray animals, or worst case, monsters. Night in the backcountry was simply that dangerous.

My carriage, traveling to Beaden, had been paid for by Allusia’s status, but it was still a little too pricey to pay for an escort to accompany a nighttime trip. I couldn’t impose on her that much, and spending my own money on a guard would have tossed a fair amount of my funds out the window, so I’d refrained.

Selna had been reluctant to part ways with me, but she’d apparently gotten a summons from the adventurer’s guild—we’d said our goodbyes pretty much right after I’d tested the longsword.

I thought back to our farewell.

“Seriously, the guild admin can be such slave drivers... Master, I have to go.

When you come back to the capital, I insist you drop by the guild. I plan to stay here for a while."

"Yeah, sure thing. Stay safe, Selna."

The adventurer's guild, huh? That place had nothing to do with me. Beaden was too far out in the sticks for anything to happen that required the request of an adventurer—whenever a few beasts or monsters showed up, my pupils and I were able to handle things. We even had my dad around if we needed him.

I didn't mind going to visit Selna, though. Besides, it was possible that some of my pupils had become adventurers too. So, I considered visiting the guild the next time I was in the capital.

"Right, I'll be in your care," I said to the driver.

"Likewise," he replied. "The road is a little long. Just take it easy."

I leaned back in my seat. Nobody took carriages out to the sticks at this time, so in essence, this one had been reserved just for me. Unlike on the way to the capital, I didn't have the company of another passenger, so it was a little boring. And since it was dark, I couldn't even direct my eyes to the passing scenery like I had during the day.

Given this, I figured I'd take a nap. There was no better way of killing time on occasions like this. I closed my eyes. Partly because of the fatigue from wandering all over the place today, I dozed off in an instant.

"Sir. Sir. We're in Beaden."

"Mmm..." Shaken by the shoulder, I woke up in a daze. I took a look outside and saw that the sun had completely set, giving me a hint at how long I'd been out. "Aaah, we've arrived?"

Mm-hmm, I slept like a rock. Well, whatever.

I turned to the driver. "Sorry about that, and thank you."

"Think nothing of it. You must've been tired. Take care."

I stepped out of the carriage, and despite having been gone for less than a day, I felt awfully nostalgic. Just visiting the capital was a significant event for

me, but I'd even had touching reunions one after the other with Allusia, Kewlmy, and Selna.

That was definitely worth rejoicing, but being in an unfamiliar city and meeting people I hadn't seen for so long was also a mentally exhausting experience.

"Now then, time to get home and... Hm?"

Beaden was out in the sticks. This late at night, houses that still had their lamps on were in the minority. All the shops were closed, so at most, you'd see light coming from public lodgings. However, after walking a while and reaching my place, I spotted a glow coming from the dojo.

"That's rare. Do we have a guest?"

Seeing a light on in my house would be one thing, but seeing one in the dojo at this time was quite unusual. I doubted that my old man had stayed up this late swinging a sword in there. Curious about what was going on, I quickly approached the dojo.

"I'm back," I announced, sliding open the door. "Is someone here?" This was my dojo now, so there was no need for modesty.

"Yo." My dad gave a nod of greeting. "You're finally back."

Next to him were some people I hadn't expected to see: a young man and a quiet-looking woman who was holding a small baby in her arms.

"Master!" cried the young man. "It's been a long time!"

"Hello. Thank you for your hospitality," said the woman.

"Well, if it isn't Randrid," I replied. "Long time no see."

"Yes! I'm glad to see you're the same as always, Master!"

Setting aside the unfamiliar woman for now, I greeted the young man, who returned my greeting with vigor. He had intelligent features and short blond hair. Though he wasn't exactly brawny, he had a good balance of muscles made for swinging a sword. He—Randrid Patlocke—was a graduate of our dojo.

If I remembered right, he was now just shy of thirty. His character matched

his friendly expression, and he was pretty good with a blade too. The majority of our dojo's pupils ranged from children to young adults, so he'd served as one of my senior students.

He was also another graduate I'd gifted a farewell sword to. After tempering his skills at our dojo for six years, he'd gone to Baltrain, saying he would become an adventurer. There was no reason for him to go out of his way to visit Beaden.

"And who is this next to you?" I asked.

"Allow me to introduce you." Randrid turned to the woman and baby. "This is my wife, Fanery, and my son, Jayne."

"I'm Fanery Patlocke," she said. "I hear my husband is greatly indebted to you."

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm Beryl."

Fanery bowed. *Seriously? Randrid got married?* He was well into adulthood already, but he was still far younger than me. Seeing him married—and with a kid, even—was quite a shock.

"Anyway, what brings you here today?" I asked.

I was pretty sure he hadn't come by just to introduce his wife and kid. If that were the case, he would've visited (or told us in some other way) when he got married. I couldn't figure out why he'd come to our village at this exact moment.

"Well, to tell you the truth, once Jayne was born, I started considering retirement from the adventuring life," Randrid said.

"Hmm..." I nodded. "I get where you're coming from."

Randrid was a platinum rank adventurer. Considering adventurers as a whole, that placed him above average. The general consensus was that gold ranks were full-fledged adventurers, whereas everyone beyond that was said to be talented or lucky. Naturally, luck alone wasn't enough to carry you to platinum—achieving that rank was proof of significant effort.

I honestly thought it was a bit of a waste for him to quit. However,

adventuring was a dangerous job. It was the stuff of dreams, but that dream was always accompanied by significant risk. In short, Randrid had chosen his family over his aspirations.

“I’d say it’s your choice. It’s not my place to judge. Just be sure not to regret it,” I advised.

Randrid exchanged a quick glance with his wife, then cheerfully replied, “Of course!”

It looked like he truly had no regrets. *That’s great.*

“So what’ll you do now?” I asked.

“About that—I’m thinking of moving here to Beaden,” Randrid answered. “It’s thanks to you that I was able to make it so far, after all. I’m here today to give my greetings.”

“Is that so?”

This village was smack-dab in the middle of nowhere, but it was a nice place to raise a family in peace. There were enough jobs to go around, and food scarcity wasn’t something that troubled any of us.

“By the way, I heard something from the grandmaster,” Randrid said. “You’ve become a special instructor for the Liberion Order, right? Congratulations!”

“Y-Yeah. Thanks.” I was a little embarrassed—being a so-called special instructor still didn’t feel real.

Incidentally, by grandmaster, he was referring to my dad. Once in a while, whenever I absolutely had to be away on other matters, my old man would still give lessons at the dojo. He had handed off the dojo to me, but I didn’t consider this as overstepping or anything. It actually helped me out a lot. I hated how little tact he had when talking about my life, but he really had it together when it came to the dojo.

“Beryl, I’ve been chatting with Randrid while waiting for you to come back,” my dad said.

“Hm? About what?”

He looked and sounded like he was having fun. In that sense, he still gave off

a youthful impression. However, whenever my old man made a face like that, I just knew he was up to no good. What on earth had they been talking about?

“About the dojo,” he began. “Randrid will be looking after it.”

“Huh?”

What?

“Go settle down in Baltrain and fulfill your duty.”

“Hah?”

What?

“And while you’re at it, don’t come back until you find a wife. Gimme a grandkid already.”

“Ah?”

Whaaaaaat?!

“Wha?! Uh?!” I shouted in shock. “What’s the meaning of this, pops?!”

But my dad’s answer was indifferent. “You gotta ask? I just explained it.”

Oops. I’d forgotten that Randrid’s baby was here too. I had to avoid yelling too loudly. But still, how could I not be stunned by this? What the hell was my old man saying?

“Please leave the dojo to me,” Randrid joined in. “Though I am unworthy, I’ll perform my duties to the best of my abilities!”

“Ah, um, well, mmm...”

Randrid was a lost cause. In all likelihood, my dad had already coaxed him into this. Though the young man was *my* former pupil, he had a good relationship with my old man too.

“That’s the gist of it,” my dad said. “You can stay here tonight, but starting tomorrow, go to the capital and do your job.”

“I *can* stay? Isn’t this my house too...?” I trailed off weakly, overwhelmed by my dad’s flippant behavior.

I knew him very well. When he was like this, he was never going to budge. His

opinion was unyielding. I'd always considered the old man to be uninhibited, but I never thought he'd kick his own son out of his house.

Though I didn't want to just allow this decision to be made for me, things had gone so far, and there was nothing I could do. It would be impossible for me to convince my dad otherwise. *I really, really don't want to accept it, though.*

As all of this sunk in, I realized that I had to start packing. Fortunately, I didn't have much to bring with me. To take it to an extreme, as long as I had a sword and traveling expenses, I could manage one way or another. I'd been appointed as a special instructor for the order too, so for the foreseeable future, I likely didn't need to worry about my livelihood.

My dad stared at me intently. "I'm looking forward to it, Beryl."

"I'll refrain from asking what exactly you're looking forward to..."

Turning my back to him, I left the dojo in low spirits, with no other choice but to return to my room.



"And that's what happened. Man, I'm at a loss."

"That's wonderf—I mean, terrible, isn't it?"

The following day, after being politely driven out of my home and dojo by my dad, I found myself in front of Allusia once more. We were in a room at the order's office. It had white walls and was furnished only with a desk and chairs. The space wasn't exactly drab, but it was far from posh and luxurious. The fact that the order hadn't taken to extravagance was proof of its proper management. Not that I ever imagined Allusia would embezzle funds to indulge in opulence.

I'd returned to Baltrain with my sword, all my belongings, and plenty of traveling expenses. It was a good thing I'd saved up a decent amount of money. Turns out, I'd been right not to buy that sword yesterday. I could afford it, but that one blade had a considerable price tag, which would've rendered my savings somewhat unreliable in the future. I never could've anticipated that it would turn out like this, though.

“I’ve gotta find some lodgings first,” I said. “Sorry, but I’ll need to rely on your help for this.”

“It’s fine, I don’t mind...”

Because of my dad’s personality, there was no budging him once he’d made his decision. My mom had been my last ray of hope, but apparently, she was on his side. I couldn’t exactly argue when they were both pestering me for grandkids in unison. What had I done to deserve this?

My old man had totally won over Randrid too. Randrid had given me a tremendous smile, saying, “Master! Please give it your best!” It was hard to say anything back when he was so optimistic. Fanery’s gentle eyes had also been hard to endure.

“A-Allusia? Is something wrong?”

It wasn’t like I had any special connections in Baltrain. I was seriously sorry to be taking advantage of her, but Allusia was pretty much the only one I could rely on right now. I’d come to her for advice, but she now seemed to be deep in thought. I guess it didn’t look good for the special instructor of the order to be reduced to such a predicament.

“I suppose...my house would be out of the question?” Allusia said after a long silence.

“Obviously!”

I’d been wondering about what had her so deep in thought, but that option was naturally out of the question. It would be bad in all sorts of ways for the young knight commander to be living together with an old man. I didn’t want to tarnish the order’s (or Allusia’s) reputation like that.

“Unfortunately, the order isn’t very well versed in matters such as this,” Allusia said. “An adventurer like Lysandra might know better.”

“I see. Now that you mention it...”

She had a point. Adventurers took jobs in every corner of the globe, so they were probably more familiar with finding places to stay. I’d never dropped by the adventurer’s guild before, but Selna had insisted that I visit, so if I asked,

she'd probably at least tell me about someplace I could stay.

"I'd like to secure an inn within the day, so I'll head there right away," I said.

"In that case, I'll show you the way. It isn't that far from the office."

"Thanks, that helps."

We rose from our seats. I hefted my luggage on my back while Allusia only grabbed her sword, and we both left the office.

"It's over there," she said, pointing.

"That really was close."

We soon arrived at the Liberis Kingdom's branch of the adventurer's guild. It truly *was* close to the Liberion Order's office. We'd only walked one block down the street. It hadn't even taken five minutes.

The guild wasn't quite the size of the order's office but was still on the larger side of buildings in Baltrain. Even when the building had only been a blur in the distance, I'd seen what looked like adventurers entering and exiting. *Looks like business is thriving.*

"Shall we?" Allusia said.

"Yeah."

It was a little nerve-wracking to enter an unfamiliar building for the first time. Utterly ignorant of my mental state, Allusia swung the door open without any hesitation and strolled in. I followed in a fluster.

Inside was a large lobby with a counter in the middle. On either side of the counter were boards, and behind the board to the right was a staircase that led upstairs. To the left was what appeared to be a social space—there, adventurers lounged around several circular tables, just killing time.

As expected of adventurers, they didn't give me weird looks like the people in town. *Oh, but that guy just did a double take.* He was probably shocked to see Allusia. She, on the other hand, ignored all such gazes and walked right up to the receptionist at the counter.

"Excuse me, could you get Twin Dragonblade Selna Lysandra for me?"

The receptionist blinked, tension and bewilderment clearly written on her face. “Y-Yes. Please wait a moment.”

Well, the knight commander of the Liberion Order didn’t normally visit the adventurer’s guild, but here she was, looking for a black rank adventurer. It would be natural to assume that some kind of major incident was on the move if the two of them were involved.

They’re actually just trying to secure lodging for an old man, though. Man, life is rough.

“Citrus, if this is something stupid, I’ll—” Selna had descended the stairs with a somewhat annoyed look, but when she spotted me, her eyes shot open. “Master?!”

“Y-Yo, Selna. Been a day.” Never thought I’d be meeting her again right away. Feels kinda awkward to stand around in the guild like this.

“There’s nothing ‘stupid’ about my visit,” Allusia replied. “In a sense, this is of utmost importance.”

Selna’s eyes stayed fixed on me. “I didn’t imagine you’d be dropping by so soon.”

“Sorry for surprising you,” I replied. “Something unexpected came up.”

“Hmm, well, there’s no point standing around, so come upstairs. Are you coming too, Citrus?”

“Obviously.”

I didn’t think there was anything so goddamn obvious about Allusia coming along, though. I just wanted a little help finding somewhere to stay, so why did we need a stacked roster to figure that out?

At any rate, if we were all heading upstairs, I wanted to get moving immediately. The eyes around us were staring like crazy. I was an old man coming in with the Liberion Order’s knight commander and asking for a black rank adventurer, all without an appointment. Then, the aforementioned adventurer (who was of the highest-ranking class) spoke to me with uncharacteristic amounts of reverence. This was basically as suspicious as it got.

Allusia and Selna didn't seem to mind, but the whole thing bothered me intensely. As such, I wanted to be free of this atmosphere as soon as possible.

It wasn't clear whether Selna could read how I was feeling, but regardless, she walked back upstairs. Taking advantage of the escape route, I followed her up. The second floor wasn't a lobby—it was just a straight corridor with rooms lining the walls to the left and right.

"Over here. There's a meeting room inside," Selna said.

"You sure we can just use it?" I asked.

"It's fine. I basically have permission to use it at my leisure during my stay."

"That's a black rank for you." I shook my head in amazement. "You sure do get the red carpet."

"It's all thanks to your guidance, Master."

How so? I couldn't make heads or tails of that.

Once we'd arrived in the meeting room, Selna turned to me. "So? What is it that you need?"

"Aah, about that..."

We all took a seat and I gave her the same explanation I'd given Allusia. It was pretty embarrassing to talk about, though. *Seriously, that damn old man...*

"I see. If that's the case, I know of several cheap but quality inns," Selna said. "If possible, one close to the guild would be best in terms of public order."

"Wait right there, Lysandra," Allusia cut in. "Master Beryl will be going in and out of our office, and from a public order perspective, being closer to my house would be far nic— More convenient."

"What?" Selna balked. "Are you saying that out of spite? The adventurer's guild and the order's office are right next to each other, so in terms of convenience, this neighborhood makes more sense."

The two of them started up their rapid-pace arguing again, neither pausing to breathe. Frankly, I didn't really care where I ended up. I just wanted to be introduced to some housing.

In the end, despite the short quarrel, I set up my base in Baltrain not too far from the guild and the order's office.



"This is the training hall."

"Hmm. It sure is nice. Plenty of space too."

The day after securing an inn, Allusia guided me to the training hall inside the order's office. While on the topic of inns, I was staying at a cheap place just a small distance from the office and the guild—right off the main street. It was also only a short walk from grocery stands and many restaurants, and it scored points for being near some blacksmiths. I decided not to think too deeply about why Allusia was strangely sulky about it.

Also, a "cheap and quality inn" from Selna's perspective was a "relatively pricey and nice inn" from mine. I suppose a black rank adventurer's income was a lot higher than mine. It wasn't too expensive for me to stay there, but if I was going to be in Baltrain for a while, I figured it would be best to keep my spending under control. The guild and office were pretty much in the middle of the city, which meant that the inns in the area were more expensive.

Selna had insisted that I could stay at a far nicer inn, but I'd pushed back, saying this was just about right for me. I didn't really care about living in luxury. So long as my environment provided the bare necessities, I had no complaints. After all, I'd come from the sticks, so that kind of stuff didn't bother me.

"In general, everyone trains here at their own convenience," Allusia explained.

"Mm-hmm, seems so."

Turning my attention back to the hall, I saw a good number of knights already devoting themselves to their practice. Some were swinging at wooden dummies, some were sparring, some were doing muscle training, and some were taking a break. They really were free to use the space at their own pace.

"Listen closely, everyone!" Allusia yelled, her powerful voice echoing through the room. All those present in the hall stopped what they were doing. "Our schedule has moved up. Mr. Beryl will be providing us with guidance starting

today. I expect even more from your training henceforth.”

“Forgive me for interrupting. I look forward to working with all of you,” I added.

Oh man, their eyes were really piercing me. I’d already been introduced, but a lot of their expressions seemed to be questioning who the hell this guy was. After all, it was problematic to have some old man pop out of nowhere. Silence sank over the training hall.

Then, after a moment, a young man broke that silence and stepped over to us. “Please wait a moment, Commander.”

“Henbrits? What is it?” Allusia asked.

This man had been quietly focused on a wooden dummy earlier. He had tan skin, a prominent nose, and almond-shaped eyes. From the musculature I could see beneath his shirt, he had a well-tempered body.

“We are the proud Liberion Order,” he stated. “Our instructor must possess significant skill. I do not doubt Mr. Beryl’s abilities, but...please provide us with a demonstration of his strength.”

The man named Henbrits stared daggers into me. *Well, this clears things up.* He’d been the one who’d given me an awfully hostile look during my introduction yesterday. He wasn’t quite belittling me, but I could sense his strong spirit wordlessly asking, “Just who does this geezer think he is?”

“Allusia, this is...?” I asked.

“Henbrits Drout,” she answered. “He serves as the Liberion Order’s lieutenant commander.”

“Hmm, the lieutenant, huh?” I muttered. That made him a real hotshot. Scary.

“Anyway, this is a good opportunity to demonstrate your true strength, Master.”

“Huh?”

Seriously?

“Mr. Beryl, I’m well aware that this is rude, but please allow me the honor of

a bout.” Henbrits passed a wooden sword to me.

No refusing at this rate—I have no choice but to go along with his request.

“This works out well,” Allusia said. “Shall we call all the other knights here too?”

“Huh?”

For real? If this went poorly, everyone might learn about my true strength and be disappointed. Not that I was concerned with keeping up appearances or anything. Still, it would be pretty embarrassing to be practically executed in front of all the knights. I couldn’t really argue, though. I was already their special instructor.

Man, life is rough.

“Are both of you ready?”

“I am.”

“I’m ready too...”

Using her authority as the knight commander, Allusia had gathered all of the off-duty knights. It seemed that the mock battle between Henbrits and I would happen in front of a fairly large crowd. Allusia was serving as the referee, though she probably just wanted a front-row seat.

As I prepared for the bout, my ears picked up on some of the chatter around me.

“Hey, what’s everyone doing here?”

“You haven’t heard? The new instructor, Beryl, is facing Lieutenant Henbrits in a mock battle.”

“Seriously? Guess I’ll get to see the lieutenant’s swordplay for the first time in a while.”

Hm. It seems like they all have a lot of faith in this Henbrits guy.

Despite his youthful appearance and behavior, it was clear that Henbrits had wholeheartedly devoted himself to the sword. It was also obvious that he had apprehensions about me appearing out of nowhere to be their special

instructor. I sympathized with him in this regard. Earlier, he'd mentioned the great pride he had in the order—of course it would be difficult for him to accept an old man showing up out of the blue and milling about their ranks. If I'd been in his position, I probably would've thought the same thing.

"Mr. Beryl, may we have a good match," Henbrits declared.

"Yeah, same here. Looking forward to it."

We stood at the center of the training hall and bowed to one another. *Hmm, his form is clean.* I understood why his opinion of me might not be so favorable, and I could tell that he wasn't a bad person. All around us, I felt the excited, expectant gazes of the other knights. Well, most eyes were on Henbrits. It was easy to see how popular he was with regard to his skill and character and such.

Right here, right now, the lieutenant commander of the Liberion Order was going to cross blades with me. This thrilled everyone, even if it was only a mock battle. *Seriously, how did it come to this? I'm just a boring old country bumpkin.* But at this point, it's not like I could do anything to stop the challenge. I had to, at the very least, put in enough effort to avoid humiliating myself if I lost.

Concentrate.

I readied my wooden sword in front of me. Henbrits fixed me with a hostile stare—I even saw a tinge of bloodlust in his eyes. *Crap, now I really have to give it my all.*

"Begin!"

Allusia's voice echoed through the training hall. Henbrits instantly and vigorously lunged toward me. My eyes tracked his movements, and the noisy clamor from our surroundings immediately vanished. It wasn't like the crowd had fallen silent or anything—I'd just shut it all out. I was focused purely on my opponent, and the only stimuli my senses registered concerned his incoming attacks.

The waves in my mind calmed, becoming as placid as the surface of a tranquil lake. I observed him. Yup, he had a terrific fighting spirit. However, he was just a little too hotheaded.

Suddenly, Henbrits stepped in with a hardy yell. "Haah!"

Hmm. An upper thrust, but it's a feint leading into a slash to the left torso, I guess. It wasn't a bad move, but it left the forward leg too far out. It would be hard for him to dodge any follow-ups in the case that his attack was read or evaded.

"Shah!"

His wooden sword closed in exactly as predicted, and I intercepted his strike from above. I could've stepped back to dodge it, but if I had, we would've returned to square one. Besides, my read on him had turned out to be correct, so this was a good chance to look cool.

That greed drove me to go on the attack. The hearty *thud* of wooden swords colliding echoed throughout the hall. Unlike a thrusting attack, a torso strike lost a lot of strength if its trajectory was diverted in the initial phase, so I didn't have to put much effort into my counter. After hitting Henbrits's sword from above, I twirled the tip, diverting his weapon and pointing it in a direction that prevented him from using his full strength for another blow. My plan was to leave him completely open and throw him off-balance.

"Wha?!"

Ooh, that's an exquisite face you're making, Henbrits. But how unfortunate—my sword isn't gonna give you the time to process this.

I maintained the momentum of my weapon, shearing it through the air in a straight line toward Henbrits's neck. It would've been nice to follow through, but I pulled my sword right before I made contact. There was no need to finish this, after all. Besides, at the angle and speed with which I'd come at him, a strike to his exposed neck would be considerably dangerous. My read on him had just gone that well.

"Whoa, the instructor was able to counterattack? Amazing..."

"You're kidding me... He could see the lieutenant's slash coming?"

Oh crap. I could once again hear the chattering around me. My counter had gone so well that I'd lost a little focus—this was a failure on my part as an instructor. *I have to concentrate. I can't embarrass myself after coming this far.*

The moment I lowered my sword from his neck, Henbrits charged again.

“Not yet!”

A high stance to a right shoulder strike, I think.

This approach focused on pushing through with sheer force. But he'd made another unfortunate choice: a powerful attack focused in one direction was extraordinarily weak against pressure from the side. So, I held my wooden sword vertically against his and warded off the strike from above. I had no sword guard, so I had to be careful not to get my hand caught in this. Henbrits had significant strength, so warding away his blow poorly could place me in danger.

“Hup! And...there.” I diverted his diagonal slash, twisted my shoulders, then delivered a blow from my dominant hand.

“Hrk?!”

Crap... I had meant to stop short, but I'd ended up hitting the tip of his jaw. Henbrits's head reeled backward.

“S-Sorry! You okay?” I called out in a panic, but his eyes were still burning with fighting spirit. The fire in his gaze made it apparent that this mock battle wasn't over.

“I-I'm fine!” Henbrits yelled.

“Hmm, that's good.”

Great, he's not bleeding. Still, I'd struck his jaw with my hilt at significant speed. He wouldn't be walking away from that unscathed. He'd given me the all clear though, so apparently it wasn't a problem. At the very least, he wasn't visibly injured.

I took a step back to initiate a short pause. This mock battle wasn't over, but if we reengaged right away, it looked like Henbrits would suffer a little too much damage.

“How terrifyingly fast,” he muttered. “I was pretty confident in my own speed...”

“I'll take that as a compliment,” I replied. “But in my case, it's more prediction based on experience. It isn't all that impressive.”

There was no mistaking it: Henbrits's swordplay was remarkably fast. His confidence was indeed well-founded. However, despite not being that strong, I'd accumulated significant experience when it came to crossing swords. Henbrits was still young. Being capable of such swordplay at his age was impressive, but in the realm of reading your opponent, I still appeared to have an advantage. My edge—in other words, my ability to predict his movements and counterattack—all came from years of exposure to swordsmanship.

"Here I come!" he roared.

Oops, I guess break time is over. Henbrits lightly cracked his neck, then rushed me with even more vigor, as if insisting that we were starting over. This time, he was even faster than before. *He has good instincts for swordsmanship.* It gave me a glimpse into his dedication, and I became aware of just how much training he likely did.

A low stance to an upward slash. Dodge it with half a step to the side.

Another step in, and a blow to the torso on the backswing. Block it with my sword.

Oh, he left his face open again. Should I go for the neck one more time? No, doing the same thing twice is a little pretentious.

Oops, here comes a spinning strike. Not a bad combo. His speed is wonderful too. I think I'll take a page from his book and do a little twirl.

"Wha?!"

From my current position, I couldn't see Henbrits's face. The moment he spun, I also spun around his back. I knew he was surprised. After all, his sword had come to a stop in midair.

"That's another."

I brought my wooden sword down on the back of his defenseless head. A stiff *thud* resounded from his skull.

"Ow?!"

"Can you keep going?" I asked.

This was my first good match in a while. Maybe because of that, I was getting

a little pumped up. Normally, I would never press my opponent for more.

“Of course!” Henbrits yelled, charging in for the fourth time.

And so, Henbrits and I crossed swords for a solid ten minutes. In the end, he fell to his knees, panting for breath, and accepted his loss in a truly vexed tone.

Man, that took a while. I mean, normal bouts don't drag on this long. You've got crazy stamina, Henbrits.

Still, this had been my first good workout in a while. I'd somehow managed to maintain my dignity too. Not a bad result.



“W-Wow!”

“The *lieutenant*, of all people, couldn’t even score a single hit?!”

“What insane reaction speed...”

The moment I stopped concentrating, I heard voices all around me. Come on, it wasn’t that surprising, right? In truth, Henbrits’s speed and power were very impressive. But his movements were just a little too straightforward, so I’d simply exploited those openings to get my own hits in. I hadn’t done anything special.

“That was a splendid display, Master,” Allusia said, smiling with endless admiration.

“Aah, thanks, Allusia.” I grabbed the towel she’d suddenly held out to me and began wiping away my sweat.

“Hm-hmm.” She turned to Henbrits defiantly. “So? What do you think?”

“I’m utterly defeated,” he answered. “To think that he’s *this* strong... Please excuse my unimaginable rudeness, Mr. Beryl.”

“It’s fine—I don’t mind. Frankly, it makes sense to question the qualifications of a guy like me who appeared out of nowhere.”

Henbrits’s hostility was gone entirely, and the way he looked at me now was utterly different from ten minutes ago. Allusia’s triumphant expression stood out far more, though. *It’s a bit...embarrassing*. I kinda hoped she would stop.

“Anyway, it looks like there are things I can teach the knights,” I muttered, hoping to change the topic. “That’s a relief.”

“Again with the humility,” Allusia interjected immediately. “Everyone has a great many things to learn from you, Master.”

I wasn’t being humble or anything—I was simply an old man with a little talent for swordsmanship who had a slightly better reaction speed than the average person. This time around, my perception had easily been able to interpret Henbrits’s style.

The age gap between Henbrits and me was equivalent to the gap in

experience. My manner of one-on-one strategizing wasn't something that could be acquired over a short period of time. In all likelihood, if we'd been the same age, the outcome of our match would've been different. Put another way, I'd only triumphed over him because I had more years of experience.

"Everyone is already gathered, so shall we move on to receiving your instruction?" Allusia suggested.

"Sure thing," I agreed.

I could tell that all the other knights looked at me differently now too. At the very least, things were way easier without all those dubious eyes on me. On the inside, I was no more than a boring old man, but being treated nicely was something to be grateful for. What's more, teaching somewhere outside the dojo felt like such a fresh opportunity.

"First, I guess I'll take a look around and try to assess everyone's current skill level," I said.

"Hee hee, please take it easy on them, Master."

I glanced around the room and was met with respect, awe, and nervousness. *Hmm, even if all the skeptics are gone, this is a little...*

"Is everyone all right with that?" I asked the room.

"Y-Yes!" the knights responded timidly.

"Uh... You don't need to be so stiff, okay?" They didn't have to act so respectful either. Even if I was their special instructor now, I was no more than a humble old man.

Well, whatever. As long as we got along, they were sure to loosen up over time.



"In celebration of Mr. Beryl's appointment as our special instructor, cheers!"

"Cheers! Yay!"

After finishing our first day of training, I followed the lieutenant commander to a tavern close to the order's office. Our group consisted of me, Allusia,

Henbrits, and Kewlny. There was no point in forcing people to come to a party for some old man, so I was fine with how few people there were. And honestly, taking it easy and drinking with a small group suited my personality better.

“Sorry for having you set this up for me,” I said, taking a swig of my ale. We were all sitting at a circular table. Perhaps because the work day was just ending, men and women of all ages were seated along the counter and at the other tables.

“Think nothing of it,” Henbrits replied sincerely. “I must apologize for my earlier behavior too, so there’s no need for concern.”

Henbrits was a really serious guy. I hadn’t really minded his earlier behavior, though. I understood his feelings more than well enough, and nobody was really at fault for what’d happened. If forced to place blame, I’d probably say that this old man was at fault for nonchalantly showing up out of nowhere. Though, to be more accurate, it was *Allusia’s* fault for giving a huge promotion to said old man... *It would probably be in poor taste to bring that up.*

As such thoughts went through my mind, I casually turned to Allusia. I opened my mouth to speak, but then...

“Excuse me, I’d like more ale,” she said.

“That was quick...?!” *Already on your second drink? Hang on, didn’t we just have a toast? Wasn’t your cup filled to the brim a second ago? Did it all vanish into your stomach already? That can’t be right.*

“I love alcohol,” Allusia replied. “It’s delicious.”

“Th-That so?” I stammered, not really sure how to respond. “I guess it’s good to have something you like.”

The tranquil and imposing knight commander was the envy of all. As it turned out, she was also a heavy drinker. It was quite the shock for this old man.

“The commander is crazy at keeping her booze down!” Kewlny exclaimed. “I’ve never seen her lose a drinking contest.”

“That *is* pretty crazy.”

Don’t go having drinking contests after joining the Liberion Order, dammit. I

kept that to myself though—it would've been a little tactless to say it here. Well, the knights weren't causing trouble, so if they were just enjoying themselves, then that was fine. At the very least, it was hard to imagine them being a nuisance to the people here. As long as everyone was having fun in moderation, there was no point in being an old, lecturing grump. That wouldn't make anyone happy.

"Does everyone drink a lot?" I asked, trying to get the conversation flowing. I picked at some of the fried yam—it was well salted and paired nicely with the ale. *This kinda stuff is great...*

"We don't gather and drink very often, but everyone frequents the tavern on their own time," Henbrits answered. "It's one part of maintaining public order." He seemed to enjoy a good drink too, judging by the hearty gulp he took from his tankard.

"I get it. If knights show up regularly, it's hard for anyone to get up to no good."

I'd initially thought they were all alcoholics, but it turned out that there was another facet to it. Beaden had an inn that doubled as a place to eat and drink, but there was no dedicated tavern in the village. The capital, on the other hand, had all sorts of people coming and going—combine that with the free-flowing booze you could enjoy at this watering hole, and trouble was bound to rear its head. In that sense, having the knights show up periodically was a good crime-prevention measure.

"Having the citizens' support is vital for our work," Allusia added, gulping down her ale at extreme speed. "It's the reason we're able to do our work so brazenly."

Didn't you just order a second drink? Your cup is already empty again... How fast can you put it away? I'm surprised you haven't broken your body. I like a good drink too, but I can't imitate that.

"I just sip little by little every now and then," Kewlny said. "The commander and lieutenant both drink a ton, so I totally can't keep up."

Just as she'd said, she had her tankard clasped in both hands and was taking tiny, enjoyable sips of her drink. *Yup. Just like a little dog.* Kewlny had to be one

of the biggest healing factors within the Liberion Order. I mean, she was probably a splendid knight too, but it was hard to shake off my old image of her.

“Well, it’s not my place to say anything at this point,” I said, “but keep things in moderation.” I didn’t want to witness the commander and lieutenant commander of the great Liberion Order drinking themselves dead.

“Mr. Beryl, your swordsmanship is truly astounding!” Henbrits said, his enthusiasm perhaps fueled by the alcohol. The tankard in his hand was empty, and he slammed it against the table with a *thud*.

“Didn’t I tell you from the very beginning?” Allusia responded immediately. “Master Beryl is very strong.” Her complexion was exactly the same as before—it was impossible to tell she’d had anything to drink. Nevertheless, there was an indescribable vigor behind her words, and she wore a triumphant expression. I really wished she’d cut that out.

“I must admit, I doubted your words, Commander,” Henbrits said. “I’m full of regret.”

“As long as you understand now.”

Somehow, this had suddenly turned into a bragging festival centered around me. *Someone save me*. In an attempt to forcefully change the subject before they killed me with praise, I spoke up again. “Anyway... It’s been a pretty long time since I’ve enjoyed a drink with others like this.”

On that note, I’d decided to drink at my own pace. If I tried to keep up with them, I’d be drowning in a sea of booze.

“Is that so?” Henbrits asked. “You seem like quite the drinker...”

I casually glanced around the table. Both Allusia and Kewlmy didn’t say anything, but their expressions spoke to how unexpected they’d found this revelation. It was, in fact, true—I enjoyed my booze—but just imbibing wasn’t equivalent to sharing drinks in the company of others.

“I was raised in the sticks,” I explained. “We don’t have a tavern back home, and pretty much all of our dojo’s pupils are kids.”

Back in Beaden, I’d done most of my drinking alone. And when I’d had

company, it'd been, at most, my dad. We'd shared plenty of drinks around the dinner table, but there'd been next to no opportunities to gather with a group specifically to enjoy some booze.

"Hee hee," Allusia giggled, emptying her third tankard. "Then I insist that you accompany me next time, Master."

"Ha ha ha, take it easy on me."

Seriously—take it easy on me. I'll collapse in seconds if I drink at your pace.

"I'll come along too!" Kewlmy cheered, a tremendous smile on her face.

Just as I'd mentioned, pretty much all of our dojo's current students were children, and all of those who'd graduated had attended during their childhood. Instructors and their pupils shared close bonds, but I'd had surprisingly few opportunities to talk about anything other than swordsmanship.

"Yeah..." I muttered. "Sounds nice—gathering around a table with everyone like this."

To drink the night away with my former pupils... This was another way of interacting with them. It was difficult to watch over the children of my dojo until they were full-fledged adults. They all had their own goals and lives, and I had no intention of binding them to that backwater village forever. However, now that I'd caught up with some of them, I felt like nothing would smite me for hoping for such reunions. *There's a lot for me to look forward to here in the capital.* I'd been at my wits' end when my dad had driven me from our home, but this wasn't all that bad.

"Come now, Mr. Beryl. Let's eat and drink the night away!" Henbrits exclaimed, taking a bite of the roast chicken that had just arrived.

"Right. This is a rare opportunity for me—I'll take you up on that."

It was ridiculous to question the manners or dignity of the normally noble knights of the Liberion Order at a time like this. They knew that well and were letting loose in a good way. I decided to simply enjoy the night. As mentioned, this was indeed a rare opportunity.

"Henbrits," Allusia scoffed, "try not to be too much of a glutton."

“I don’t want to hear that from *you*, Commander. How many cups are you on now?”

“It’s uncouth to fuss over minor details...”

I laughed uproariously. “Ha ha ha ha! Allusia, you sure are quick to change your tune!”

“Aah! That’s my meat!” Kewlmy cried.

“Just order some more,” Allusia said.

“You’re the one who snatched it from me! I wanted! To! Eat it! Right now! Jeez!”

“Ha ha ha ha!”

My mirth overflowed, and just like that, the lively and fun evening passed by in a flash.

Allusia Citrus

Master Beryl really is strong.

On the way home from the tavern, I stretched, allowing the cool night wind to lower the temperature of my flushed body. When I let my thoughts wander, they naturally drifted back to the events of the afternoon.



“That was a splendid display, Master.”

“Aah, thanks, Allusia.”

The sudden mock battle started because of Henbrits’s false accusations, but it worked out well in the end. After all, Master Beryl was able to display his strength for everyone. The match lasted ten minutes—a long ten minutes. Afterward, I approached Master Beryl with a towel in hand. He was sweating a fair bit, but his breathing was perfectly level, and I could see that he still had plenty of stamina. In contrast, Henbrits’s shoulders were heaving up and down.

Their bout had been almost entirely one-sided. The reason I say “almost,” despite Master Beryl not taking a single hit, was because our instructor had always attacked *after* Henbrits—before every strike, Master Beryl had taken a moment to observe and get a perfect read on the situation. Considering my master’s strengths, his style of always reacting to his opponent was in no way a mystery.

From the very first thrust, into a strike, and throughout the remaining ten minutes, Master Beryl had handled everything with utmost certainty. He’d made sure to visually confirm every one of his opponent’s moves, and his reaction speed and kinetic vision had been far beyond the skills of an average swordsman. His other techniques were also at a fairly high level, but on those two points, my master clearly deviated from the norm. I was incapable of continuously reacting as perfectly as he did. He was simply a genius who accomplished such feats with casual ease. That was the great man known as Beryl Gardinant.

“Anyway, it looks like there are things I can teach the knights. That’s a relief.”

“Again with the humility. Everyone has a great many things to learn from you, Master.”

However, the man in question seemed ever so modest and sometimes acted like he was unaware of his own strength. It was laughable for someone who’d reached such a high level to believe he was just “so-so” as a swordsman, but I chose not to point this out.

He wasn’t boastful about his strength, nor was he superficially polite about it.

He'd come to terms with his own limits and now maintained a relaxed attitude.
I like that about him.

Even now, there was still so much I wanted him to teach me. These feelings inside me hadn't changed since childhood, when he'd bestowed me with a farewell sword.



I clearly remembered *that* day from years ago—it felt simultaneously like a distant dream and something that'd happened yesterday.

“Allusia, I'd like to give you this.”

“What is it...?”

I studied swordsmanship under Master Beryl for four years, and my strength grew every day, which never ceased to surprise me. Nevertheless, I still couldn't reach his peak—the omniscient blade, movements that shaved off every last bit of waste, a stance that appeared to be the absolute embodiment of a natural posture. I was still far too inexperienced to enter Master Beryl's realm.

Despite my firm belief that I was not even close to his level, on that day, he handed me a farewell sword—a gift that signified I'd mastered everything he had to teach.

“You've grown more than strong enough. I have nothing left to teach you.”

“You can't mean that, Master! I still have so much more to learn!”

I was honestly happy that he acknowledged my progress. However, if asked whether I was satisfied with my current abilities, I would doubtlessly answer no. If skill level could be measured by height, I'd barely reach his shins. How could I have possibly mastered everything he had to teach?

“It is, of course, up to you whether you leave the dojo. However, I truly have nothing left to teach you. I'd like you to understand that.”

I detected a slight trace of guilt in his voice and expression, but his sincerity was present as well.

At that moment, I came to a realization. *Yes. In all likelihood, this man is unaware of his own strength.* Humility had piled atop humility to the point

where he'd arbitrarily decided on his own limits. It was rude to put it this way, but Master Beryl's abilities were meant for far more than being an instructor at a backcountry dojo. However, in such a restricted environment, he hadn't been permitted to realize that.

"Understood... It's my honor to accept it."

And just like that, I departed the dojo in Beaden, leaving with the goal of preparing a more suitable place for his brilliance.

Naturally, I found myself striving for the Liberion Order. They were the greatest symbol of swordsmanship in the country, and as far as I knew, this would be the best place for Master Beryl to shine.

"We will now start the practical exam!"

A strict voice resounded through the hall from what appeared to be a knight instructor. First were mock battles between fellow candidates. After that, those who showed promise were picked out to spar with the instructor. That was how they evaluated our practical abilities.

In my opinion, entry into the order went by all too quickly. Each and every one of my opponents was far too slow. *Master Beryl is three times faster than anybody here.* Even the so-called expert serving as the instructor was only half his speed. I'd grown so accustomed to Master Beryl's lightning reflexes—having always recognized his skill as the summit of swordsmanship, this test was nothing more than a minor roadblock.

Ultimately, I scored perfect marks on the practical and written exams and became a member of the Liberion Order immediately after leaving Beaden. A lot happened between then and ascending to the seat of knight commander. Because the order was an organization under the direct control of the monarchy, merely having sword skills wasn't enough if I wanted to climb the ranks. It was fortunate that I had a level of immunity to politicking thanks to my parents being merchants.

"Hee hee, he's just the same as always."

I indulged myself in thoughts of the past as I read his reply letter. Even after leaving Beaden, I sent missives to Master Beryl at fixed intervals. This was mostly driven by my personal desire for him to know about my current circumstances, but also to maintain a connection.

He sent back a reply every time. I was slightly worried that he saw me as a shameful and clingy woman, but as far as I could tell from his letters, he wasn't growing exasperated with me. However, this was something I couldn't know without asking him directly. *Not that I have the courage to do so...*

Master Beryl's humility hadn't changed, even after my graduation. Conversely, that was exactly what made him who he was. I closed my eyes and pictured him smiling broadly and gripping a sword. My fingers naturally went to the sword at my waist.

"I finally got approval, Master."

Please wait just a little longer. I've prepared a suitable stage for your abilities.

Interlude

In Beaden, the days started early. The adults began working at the break of dawn, breathing life into the entire village first thing in the morning. As if to match that, the children also rose with the sun. This was everyday life in the countryside.

Recently, a young man and his family had moved to the village.

“Oh, Randrid. Help me out for a bit.”

“Sure thing!”

An old man called out to the village’s newcomer, wanting help with the task of chopping wood. The young man and his family had wished for this country lifestyle and were doing everything they could to become proper members of the community. Though the village was small, the connections between people were strong, and the tiniest bit of interpersonal friction could threaten the entire ecosystem. Whenever a new resident moved in, rumors spread fast. Everyone then had to appraise the newcomer for themselves. It hadn’t taken much time for Randrid’s reputation to take root in Beaden.

The young man started chopping wood without looking the least bit bothered by the task. However, another old man came by and immediately began complaining.

“Hey Reddick, don’t go using our Randrid without asking.”

“Aw. Can’t you spare him for just a bit? He’s a valuable youngster.”

In contrast to the old men’s squabbling, the young man acted like it was no big deal.

“It’s fine, Grandmaster. This is for the sake of the village!”

In truth, chopping some wood for the village hardly took up any of Randrid’s energy. He’d been driven into far harsher environments countless times before this. Not many in the community were properly aware of that fact, though.

“Well...chop a little then come back to the dojo. It’s about time for the pupils to show up.”

“Ah, right. Understood!”

Even if he was a newcomer, Randrid’s job in the village wasn’t to chop wood. No, he had a different responsibility to fulfill. The grandmaster—Mordea Gardinant—had come to retrieve Randrid, but was a little thrown off by how unexpectedly eager the young man was.

“If you’ll excuse me, Reddick, I’ll stop here!” said Randrid.

“Sure thing. I don’t mind.”

Randrid couldn’t just keep chopping wood forever—once the pupils were gathered at the Gardinant dojo, he needed to begin his work as their instructor. Reddick didn’t want to get in the way of that, and it’s not like he’d intended to keep Randrid detained for too long. But Reddick was an old man now, and chopping wood made him keenly aware of how heavy his hips and arms had grown with age. So, he simply wanted whatever help he could get.

After gathering the wood he’d chopped, Randrid parted ways with Reddick and headed for the dojo. He couldn’t keep the children waiting—having been named assistant instructor by Mordea and Beryl, he had to live up to everyone’s expectations. By nature, Randrid was an endlessly honest and steady man, and he was deeply grateful that he’d been taught how to use a sword.

“Ah! It’s Instructor Randrid!”

“Hi, everyone. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

As Randrid opened the door to the dojo, he was greeted by a few children who were just picking up their wooden swords. He responded to their greetings with a smile.

Pretty much all of the pupils at this dojo were children. This hadn’t been the case during Mordea’s era, but around the time Beryl’d succeeded him, the proportion of children had rapidly increased. The reason for that wasn’t quite clear. Perhaps it was something as simple as a change in trends over the years. It wasn’t like the Gardinants hadn’t done any publicity to advertise the dojo as a place particularly suitable for children. Honestly, Randrid didn’t even know how

long this dojo had been around—there'd never been a reason to go out of his way and ask, so he'd never paid it any mind.

Randrid had only just started teaching at this dojo, but he handled the students fairly well. Some of the children had been really attached to Beryl, but they had quickly formed a good rapport with Randrid. It seemed that endlessly curious children paired well with a man who always maintained an honest personality.

"Is Master Beryl not here today?" asked one of the children.

"Master Beryl is far away on business," Randrid answered. "That's why I'll be teaching you for a while."

Randrid had no idea how many times he'd given that explanation already, but he nonetheless always answered politely. Since he had a child of his own now, Randrid viewed these moments as practice—interacting with these children was like training that would pay off with his own in a few years, so he didn't see their questions as a waste of time.

"Okay! Let's all do our best today!"

He got the children all fired up for their lessons, and they stopped messing around. The air in the dojo changed to that of an instructor teaching his students.

Randrid's title as a former platinum rank adventurer wasn't just for show. From the perspective of general society, being platinum meant he had significant skill. And even out in backwater Beaden, he was able to put that skill on display.

The children still didn't understand this, but the lack of any backlash at the sudden change in instructors was largely because of Randrid's strength. Normally, if a dojo suddenly swapped out a beloved teacher, it would be hard to retain students—after all, many of those students had gone out of their way to attend the dojo for a specific style of instruction. However, Randrid's status as a former platinum rank adventurer held great weight.

"Right then, students! Let's begin like we always do and check your basic forms."

Randrid carried a wooden sword and stood in front of his pupils. And just like that, a typical morning in Beaden passed by peacefully.



“Good work today, Randrid.”

“You don’t need to mention it.”

Teaching children wasn’t something that could drag on for hours on end. The lesson had started right as the sun rose and had naturally ended when noon came around. Though the dojo’s days off were well established, its operational hours weren’t strictly set in stone—this was a feature of being out in the countryside. Randrid still needed some time to get used to the somewhat liberal nature of his new environment.

“So, now that you’ve given it a try, how does teaching feel?” Mordea asked.

The older man had entered the dojo after lessons ended and sat cross-legged in the master’s seat. It’d been a while since Mordea had stepped down as instructor, but Beryl, Randrid, and all the dojo’s pupils—both current and former—still looked up to him. He simply had that much skill and grit, and over his many long years, he’d achieved so much.

“It’s a fresh experience,” Randrid answered, sitting upright on his heels in front of Mordea. “I’m discovering new things every day.”

Now that the children were gone, these two men were the only ones left in the dojo. It was just past noon, but a tranquil atmosphere filled the room. Only the *thunk, thunk*, of someone chopping wood in the distance, and the sound of livestock outside, could be faintly heard through the walls. The two of them liked this kind of atmosphere. As fellow followers of the blade, this background noise was far more pleasant than the hustle and bustle of the city that could disturb the mind.

“Well, he was pretty good at teaching,” Mordea muttered, stroking his beard.

In contrast to Mordea’s relaxed posture, Randrid hung his head slightly. “Are you...really sure about this?”

“Hm? About what?”

“Master Beryl becoming a special instructor for the Liberion Order is worth celebrating,” Randrid said, his expression cheerful yet also bewildered. “But having me serve as his substitute...”

“It’s fine,” Mordea replied curtly. “You don’t regret it, right?”

“Well...no. I certainly don’t.”

Mordea wasn’t talking about Randrid becoming Beryl’s substitute at the dojo. No, he was asking whether Randrid had any misgivings about retiring as an adventurer and moving his family from Baltrain to Beaden. Mordea wondered if Randrid had any lingering attachments to his old life, but truly, the young man had no regrets. He’d given up his dangerous former life because he loved his beloved wife and child above all else. Fortunately, he’d saved up during his adventurer days, and he’d also found a job here, so this environment posed no hindrance to raising his family.

“I’m sure you know this,” Mordea said, his eyes turning to the door, “but that guy shouldn’t be wasting his time out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“I know,” Randrid agreed, immediately understanding who Mordea was talking about. “I never once managed to beat him, after all.” He, too, turned to look at the door. It was closed, but he could easily imagine the scenery outside. A path into the forest stretched out from the dojo’s door, down a gently sloping hill, then passed through the sparse houses of Beaden. It was simplistic and pleasant, totally different from the big city.

Randrid naturally recalled the time he’d spent under Beryl’s tutelage. Even after all these years, he vividly remembered Beryl’s outstanding swordplay and seemingly inhuman reaction speed. In the end, Randrid hadn’t reached that summit himself, but through his humble efforts, he’d still managed to become a platinum rank adventurer. Now, if he could somehow become a stepping stone for Beryl to reach further heights, that didn’t seem so bad. Beryl’s influence on his life had simply been that enormous.

“Ha ha ha!” Mordea laughed heartily. “Well, let’s look forward to how far he can go, shall we?”

“Let’s,” Randrid agreed. “I’m sure he’ll achieve things I can’t even imagine.”

The two of them pictured the great figure of a son and a teacher. Nobody knew when that day would come—not even Beryl himself. However, these two in the dojo believed that their imagination would become reality in the not-too-distant future.

Chapter 2: An Old Country Bumpkin Meets a Wizard

“Let’s call it a day right there. Good work, everyone.”

“Thank you very much!”

I concluded the knights’ training, and they all responded cheerfully. Everyone was covered in sweat. I quickly left the training hall, wanting to get back to the inn and hop into a bath right away.

Ever since the mock battle with the lieutenant commander, Henbrits, I’d come to the Liberion Order’s training hall pretty much every day to serve as their special instructor. The original schedule had been for me to teach a few times a month, but thanks to my old man kicking me out of Beaden, I had nowhere else to go. Everything had worked out so far—Allusia looked genuinely delighted by the change of plans, and so did Kewlny. Also, beyond all expectations, so did Henbrits.

“Mr. Beryl! Thank you for your hard work!”

“A-Aah. You too, Henbrits. You’re really putting in the work every day, huh?”

Immediately after I left the training hall, Henbrits ran after me. When I heard him call my name, I stopped and turned. He held out a clean towel that he’d apparently grabbed just for me.

After our little bout, he’d decided that attaining my level of skill was one of his goals. He now followed me around, regardless of whether we were training or not. I wanted to question what a lieutenant commander of a knightly order was doing acting like that...but Allusia was pretty free-spirited in her own way too.

I’d also learned something about the knights since coming here. The Liberion Order had regular patrols and meetings, but when they weren’t on duty, they generally had plenty of free time. Naturally, wasting that time would ruin their reputation as knights, so most devoted the time to exercise and practice. In other words, as long as there wasn’t a major incident in progress, a knight’s

lifestyle largely revolved around constant training.

“I now have a major goal to achieve,” Henbrits said. “So every day is fulfilling!”

“I see. That’s good to hear...” I took the towel he’d offered and began wiping my face.

“Still, I can’t figure out how to move like you do. I need to train more.”

I chuckled. “Well, if the likes of me can manage it, you’ll get there in no time.”

Man, he seemed awfully attached to me now. It wasn’t really a bother or anything, but this kind of positive reception was honestly far beyond what I’d expected. I still hadn’t fully come to grips with being the order’s special instructor, and I certainly wasn’t used to all this attention.

“Master! Lieutenant Commander! Good work today!”

“Hey, Kewlny... Same to you.”

As I chatted with Henbrits, another knight joined in—one of my former pupils, Kewlny, who was also covered in sweat. She wasn’t wearing her plate armor and instead sported simple clothing meant for training. Because of her sweat, the fabric stuck to her skin. She was petite but well-developed, and her feminine attributes were strongly emphasized. I had to avert my eyes. *This is pretty bad for my heart...*

Kewlny closed in on me rapidly, not seeming to pick up on any signs of my internal conflict. “Have you gotten used to life in the capital yet, Master?”

Cut it out. Stop getting closer. I don’t know where to look.

“Well, I guess I am,” I answered, continually deflecting my gaze from her body. “I haven’t walked around much beyond this neighborhood, though.”

That was true—I mostly made round trips from the inn to the order’s office, so I was only familiar with the immediate area. Honestly, that hadn’t really posed any problems for me. Most of my days were dedicated to training, so I didn’t have time to waste being a tourist, nor did I have much of a reason to take a look around.

“What a shame,” Henbrits said. “Baltrain has many sightseeing spots.”

He did have a point. Baltrain was the Liberis Kingdom's capital, and it was famous for being the largest city in the country. Each of its five districts had distinct features, attracting many local and foreign tourists alike.

"I'll show you around!" Kewlmy offered enthusiastically, psyching herself up.

Cut it out. You don't have to get so damn fired up for a simple stroll around town. Well, I could brush off that behavior as one of Kewlmy's virtues. She was so earnest about everything, even being a tour guide.

"Ha ha, I guess I'll take you up on that," I told her. "But only after we get changed."

"Right! I'm totally drenched!"

It was still a little too early to go back to the inn and take a nap. Ever since settling down in Baltrain, I'd somehow or other been frequently accompanied by Allusia, so I'd spent pretty much no time with Kewlmy outside of training.

"Kewlmy, make sure you aren't rude to Mr. Beryl," Henbrits said.

He got a cheerful "Yes, sir!" in response before Kewlmy vanished into the changing room. I went and got myself changed as well.

"Master! Thanks for waiting!"

"It's fine. I wasn't here for long."

As expected, I was ready to go before Kewlmy. I was waiting right outside the office, somewhat bored with nothing to do, when she came running over wearing fresh clothing that was easy to move around in. Today, I was planning to stroll around town with Kewlmy and then visit a restaurant I'd never been to. This was the capital, after all—nobody could blame me for doing a little sightseeing.

"Oh yeah! How often did you visit Baltrain before you moved here?" Kewlmy asked.

"Not often. I came a few times many years ago. Traveling here with Allusia was my first visit in a long while."

Just as I'd relayed, my last memory of Baltrain was from long ago. The dojo

was back home in Beaden, so I'd never had a reason to spend half a day in a carriage just to visit the capital. I did, of course, recognize the royal palace, though none of the other sights seemed to jog my memory.

But now, the capital was my temporary residence. Allusia had given me a figure for the income I could expect as a special instructor, so I knew I had money coming my way soon. Considering all this, I wasn't opposed to spending a little free time (and some gold) around the city.

"Okey dokey!" KewlNy exclaimed. "Let's check out the western district!"

"I'll leave our destination up to you. Looking forward to it."

And so, we headed for the western district, taking a stagecoach that circled the capital's streets. *The more years I get under my belt, the nicer it feels to just take a relaxing stroll.* Though I enjoyed having quiet time to myself, being around lively company was good in its own way.

"The western district is mostly a commercial area," KewlNy explained. "It's got, like, all kinds of shops."

I chatted with her as I took in the scenery. *Baltrain's a really nice city.* It had a central district where the order's office and the adventurer's guild were, as well as four other districts in each cardinal direction. According to KewlNy, the western district was bustling with commerce. You could find a mix of everything from grocery stores, to restaurants, to general goods stores, smithies, and even magic item shops.

"The southern district is dedicated to agriculture, so there might not be much to see there," KewlNy continued as we got off the stagecoach and started walking through the western district. "The north contains Liberis's royal palace, while the east is, like, mostly residential. I also live in the eastern district."

"I see. So I guess the western district is where all the tourists go?"

"Mm-hmm. It attracts a ton of them, but I'd guess the north has the most. The palace is real popular for sightseeing."

Now that she mentioned it, the royal palace was probably the centerpiece of the entire country. I doubted that normal tourists were allowed inside, but it was more than enough for people to take a look at the outside.

Just walking down the street, I saw all kinds of different shops and people. The energy in this town flooded my vision, and it was a fresh experience to walk down an unfamiliar road while letting my eyes wander everywhere. *I'm acting like a shining example of an old country bumpkin.* Also, unlike the very famous Allusia and Selna, Kewlny was a completely normal knight who was still working on making a name for herself. That might've sounded rude, but her lack of status came with a perk for me—nobody bothered to give her a second look. I was unmistakably a regular old man, so no one's eyes were drawn to me either. Frankly, it was wonderful to take a walk without having to worry about others staring at me.

In the middle of people-watching, sightseeing, and listening to Kewlny's explanations, a monotone voice reached my ears.

"Ah, it's Master Beryl."

"Hmm?" *If I'm not imagining things, then...I just heard my name.*

I came to a stop and glanced around to try and locate the source of the voice. There—a robed woman who seemed to be on her way out of the western district. Her glossy black hair was cut evenly at her shoulders, and her somewhat vacant eyes were pointed right at me.

"Mm. It really is," she murmured. "Long time no see."

"Master? What's up? Someone you know?" Kewlny asked, peeking out from beside me.

The black-haired woman paid Kewlny no attention and continued staring at me.

Umm... Who's that?

A bubble of silent awkwardness formed around me, Kewlny, and this robed woman, seeming to dominate the lively atmosphere of the street.

"Ah!" Kewlny suddenly yelled, popping that bubble after a few seconds. "It's Fice!"

"Kewlny. Where did you come from?" the woman asked.

"I've been here the whole time!"

Only after being called by name did the woman—*Fice?*—turn away from me to stare at Kewlmy. Apparently, Fice hadn't even noticed the young knight until now.

"Kewlmy, is this someone you know?" I asked.

The woman seemed to know who I was, and she was also Kewlmy's acquaintance. I, however, didn't recognize her at all. *I'd better ask Kewlmy for an explanation.*

"Master... Have you, like, forgotten her?" Kewlmy asked, turning an uncharacteristically harsh look at me.

"Uh..."

"How cruel, Master Beryl. So sad. Boo-hoo-hoo." The black-haired woman joined in, still expressionless and clearly feigning her tears.

I was speechless. *Really, I don't recognize her...* The same thing had happened with Selna, but in that case, my last memory of her had been so long ago—she'd left the dojo at a young age, so connecting the dots between her childhood self and her current appearance had been impossible. In contrast, Fice looked about the same age as Kewlmy. And, seeing how Kewlmy was accusing me of forgetting her, it was highly likely that Fice had attended our dojo during the same period. Still, despite the fact that Fice had recognized Kewlmy at a single glance, nothing was ringing a bell.

"Mrgh. Oh well. How about this?" Fice puffed out her cheeks and pulled a sword from her robes.

"Hmm...?"

I did remember this blade—it was one of my farewell swords. That meant Fice had attended the dojo, and what's more, she'd graduated, mastering everything I could teach.

Crap. It would be extremely bad if I couldn't remember her now. I dug deep into my memory, deciding not to use her appearance as a reference. Girls grew up a lot in only a few short years, and hairstyles were nothing to go off of either. Though, her hair *color* probably hadn't changed much. *I bet it was black back then too.* Her personality was probably similar as well.

A girl with black hair who speaks in peculiarly short sentences. I gave her a farewell sword. Fice... Wait, Fice?

“Ah... Are you, perhaps, Ficelle?” I asked.

“Correct,” she said, her voice still sullen. “But too slow. So sad.”

It turned out the woman before me was, in fact, Ficelle. Now that I’d figured out who she was, my memories came flooding back.

Ficelle Habeler—one of the pupils to whom I’d given a farewell sword. She’d attended the dojo at the same time as Kewlmy. However, unlike Kewlmy, who’d left after two years, Ficelle had attended for about five and had graduated after mastering our sword style.

And yet... The Ficelle in my memories was a little more boyish. As a child, she’d given off a completely different impression. Her hair had been shorter, and she’d been very slender. She hadn’t been the type to say much when she talked, so aside from uttering the bare necessities, she’d swung her sword silently the whole time. Her clothing had also been very modest. The Fice before me wore a fine robe that reached her knees, but I didn’t recall the child Ficelle being the type to have clothes like that.

My last memory of her was when I’d handed out the farewell sword. After breaking into a smile, which had been very unusual for her, she’d said, “I have something else to do now.” It’d been like she’d suddenly remembered an urgent appointment, and immediately after, she’d left our dojo.

It’d been some time since then, and now here I was, face-to-face with another unexpected reunion.

“Man, I say this every time I meet my pupils again, but...you’ve grown beyond recognition.”

“Yes, I grew,” Ficelle said. “But it’s still sad that you didn’t notice.”

“I-I’m really sorry about that.”

Even if my pupil had changed completely, forgetting about her—even after I’d given her a farewell sword—was a failure on my part as an instructor. I needed to reflect on that.

“You totally didn’t say that to me...” Kewlny muttered my way.

I shrank back slightly. “S-Sorry.”

I truly am sorry. You’re great exactly as you are, Kewlny.

“Oh well,” Kewlny said, regaining her high spirits. “Anyway! Fice is amazing! She’s proving herself as the magic corps’s ace wizard now!”

“Yup.” Fice nodded. “I’ve been doing my best. Really admirable.”

“Huh? Magic corps?” I parroted.

Why? Why, after learning swordsmanship at our dojo, would she join the magic corps?

I mean, that was, in fact, an amazing accomplishment. Wizards were very rare, even across the world as a whole, so those with the aptitude for magic were naturally few in number. Take, for example, swordsmanship—even if someone didn’t really have the talent for it, swinging a blade around all the time would eventually get them *somewhere*. But that principle didn’t apply to magic. Without talent, you’d be stuck at zero forever. There was no potential for growth without that innate spark. I, myself, had no talent for magic. Without exaggeration, the only ones who could become wizards were those born with the gift.

“So, after learning swordplay from me, you started training your magic...” I murmured. “You really have been giving it your all.”

“Mm, that’s right,” Ficelle said. “I’ve been making the best of your sword too, Master Beryl.”

“Huh?”

At the dojo, Ficelle had attained more than enough skill to deserve a farewell sword. If she used such high-level techniques and magic in concert...well, that would certainly make her a very valuable asset. Still, it was questionable whether swordsmanship had any direct merit when it came to being a wizard. Talent for the blade and talent for magic were two completely different things, after all.

“Sword magic. I’m best at it,” Ficelle explained.

“Sword...magic?”

What’s that?

“Exactly what it sounds like,” she answered. “Imbuing the sword’s movement with magic to send slashes flying. Wreathing the blade in fire or ice. That kind of thing.”

“H-Hmm. That’s amazing.” In all likelihood, she was casually admitting to having really outrageous capabilities. I didn’t know how to react. “Does anyone else use this type of magic?”

“There are others,” she replied. “Though hardly any of them can truly wield a sword.”

Honestly, I’d figured that was the case before hearing her answer. Magic naturally required talent, but great effort was necessary to nurture that talent. The same could be said of swordsmanship—training was necessary to establish skill. Wreathing a sword in magic was one thing, but the base movement for that attack still involved swordplay. As such, someone more skilled with a blade would naturally be better at it. In a sense, Ficelle was more of a magic knight than a wizard. Not that I’d ever heard of that profession...

Our conversation about sword magic reached a stopping point, and Ficelle changed the subject. “Oh yeah. Why are you in the capital, Master?”

“Aaah, about that...”

I explained that I was now a special instructor for the Liberion Order and that Kewlny was guiding me around the western district for some sightseeing.

Ficelle listened to my story, then abruptly said, “I’ll come too. Haven’t seen Kewlny in a while either.”

“Huh? You sure?” I asked.

“It’s fine. Work is done. I’ll come along.”

“We’ll guide you together, Master!” Kewlny exclaimed.

Ficelle positioned herself at my side. She was already carrying a bag in one hand, probably from a shopping trip, so was it really okay for her to be taking a stroll with me? Well, she’d said it was fine, so I had no choice but to believe her.

Suddenly, my right hand was enveloped in warmth, and I felt the sensation of her palm against my own. “Ficelle?” I asked, staring down at our now clasped hands.

“The western district is busy,” she explained. “The road gets narrow. It would be bad to get separated.”

Ahh... Oh well. I have no real reason to shake her off. “I see. I’ll let you two decide where we go.”

“Leave it to us!”

“Mm-hmm.”

And so, the three of us walked through the streets of the western district with me in the middle. Baltrain’s commercial district lived up to the rumors. The rush of people coming and going made it feel like a blanket of noisy hustle and bustle covered the entire district.

“Books are great. So relaxing.”

“Ugh. I don’t really like studying...”

“Ha ha ha.”

Ficelle’s eyes sparkled as she looked at a large bookstore facing the main road.

“Master! This! How ’bout this?!”

“Mm. I think it suits you.”

“Very childish, just like you. Not bad.”

“Grrr!”

Kewlmy tried on all sorts of outfits at a clothing store filled with the city’s latest fashions.

“This is...an accessory shop?”

“Magic equipment. To put it simply, items that have magical properties.”

“Hmm...”

I was intrigued by a store selling bracelets and necklaces and such, all charged with magical effects.

The three of us walked all over, looking at different stores. Sometimes we entered shops randomly and got really lively. Sometimes we quietly took in the sights. All of it was extremely enjoyable. After a while, it felt like it was getting pretty late, but the hustle and bustle in the western district showed no signs of dying down. Judging by the large shadow stretching out beneath me, we’d spent quite a lot of time here.

“Man, this district really has a lot to take in,” I remarked. “Even things I don’t need are eye-catching.”

“Yeah! They’ve got everything from daily necessities to rarities,” Kewlmy said. “Shops here cover a huge range of goods.”

Ficelle seemed to agree. “Mm. I also like the western district. There’s lots of stuff.”

After getting a good look around—though the range we could cover in just a few hours was limited—we took a break. At this point, I couldn’t possibly compare Beaden to Baltrain. Normally, I never went sightseeing, and had I stayed in the village, exploring a huge city like this would’ve been practically impossible.

“Hee hee,” Ficelle giggled. “Master Beryl, you’re ogling the place like crazy.”

I gave a chuckle of my own. “Aha... How embarrassing. Well, I am from the sticks, after all.” There was no helping that. Anyone from the countryside would get excited by the city’s sights.

“Master, is there anything in particular you really liked?” Kewlmy asked.

“Let’s see...” I thought it over for a moment. “Honestly, there was a ton, but the magic equipment shop was the most interesting.”

“There is depth to the world of magical equipment,” Ficelle said. “I’m glad you’re interested.”

I thought she preferred books, but it seemed Ficelle was even more fascinated by magic items.

“You really like that stuff, huh?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. I’ve got lots of things,” Ficelle muttered, the corners of her mouth turning up into the slightest smile.

There weren’t many people who could use magic, but apparently, a good number of magical items circulated throughout the city. These items were magical because of what they were made of: a mineral called magicite that naturally accumulated mana. Since the items themselves were imbued with magic, anyone (even those without any talent for magic) could use them.

I wasn’t really familiar with the details. *I am, after all, just a swordsman.* However, it seemed like magical equipment could solve a wide range of issues, from relieving fatigue, to accelerating the healing process, to offering some resistance against burns and frost. If anything, they sounded like essential items for adventurers.

“That was a great breather,” I said. “Thanks, you two.”

Having hit a good stopping point, I thanked my tour guides. This was a form of entertainment I never would’ve discovered during my daily solo round trips between the inn and the order’s office.

“You’re welcome!”

“Mm.”

They responded to me like polar opposites, but judging by their expressions, they were both pleased. That was good. All they’d done was hang out with an old man on his boring sightseeing walk—the fact that they hadn’t gotten bored or annoyed meant I’d scored full points.

“Right. It’s not much as thanks, but if the two of you have time, I’ll treat you to dinner,” I suggested.

“Huh?! Seriously?!” KewlNy exclaimed.

Even back in the dojo, she’d always been a big eater and big sleeper. *She really is a salve for the heart. Never change—you’re just fine as you are.*

“That helps. I’m starving.” Ficelle looked down at her stomach, her expression still unchanging.

I nodded. “Then it’s decided. Any recommendations?”

It *was* my treat, but I was a country bumpkin who’d only just arrived in the capital; I didn’t know any good restaurants and I didn’t know their preferences. Well, at least KewlNy looked like she would eat anything. Ficelle, on the other hand, seemed like the picky type.

“Ah! I wanna go there!” KewlNy exclaimed. “The Regen kebab shop!”

“Agreed,” said Ficelle. “I like that place too.”

“A kebab shop, huh? That sounds nice. I’m looking forward to it.”

Having decided on a menu, the three of us immediately began walking. I’d left for the western district with KewlNy right after training, so I was also pretty hungry. Currently, I had KewlNy to my right and Ficelle to my left. This was an extremely different lineup compared to the last time I walked the city in a group, but it wasn’t bad at all. I kind of felt like a parent...though that was mostly because of KewlNy. Above all else, I didn’t have to worry about people staring and could simply enjoy the sights. It was a little unbalanced for an old man to be accompanied by two young women, but that in and of itself wasn’t really worth any attention.

After walking through the western district for a while, we reached a kebab shop facing the main road.

“Right here! Their boar kebab is delicious!”

“Hmm, boar, huh?” I muttered.

Boars were wild animals that were about as large as the average human adult. Hunters in Beaden brought them back as game all the time. The meat was sometimes rather tough, meaning you really had to gnaw through it, but that was simply part of the experience—the texture could also vary greatly depending on how it was prepared. Boars could be found all over Liberis, so there were many established cooking methods.

“Pops! Three boar kebabs!”

“Coming right up!”

This was apparently the type of restaurant where you could see them cooking from the outside. Kewlny shouted her order at what appeared to be the chef, and the man gave her a hearty reply, stabbing chunks of raw boar meat onto skewers and lining them up over a charcoal fire.

“Ooh...” I stared at the roasting meat. “It already looks great.”

Ficelle nodded. “Mm. The boar here is exquisite. I guarantee it.”

Watching the marinated boar meat dripping its juices into the fire made me even hungrier—the smell of cooking meat and salty-sweet sauce really stirred the appetite. *Looks delicious. Big chunks of meat too. One stick on its own will probably be filling.*

“Whoa, this place is really packed,” Kewlny said, taking a casual look around.

“Yup,” Ficelle agreed. “Jammed full.”

“Hmm...”

Many people were buying meat kebabs, and I even saw some folks holding skewers and chowing down as they walked. This shop had a dining area, but unfortunately, every seat was taken.

“Kewlny, you live in the eastern district, right?” I asked. “That’s pretty far away. Shall we eat as we walk?”

“Sure!” Kewlny exclaimed. “It’s been a while since I’ve done that!”

“I also live in the east. That works out great,” said Ficelle.

As such, we decided to learn from our great forebears and have our dinner on the go.

“Here you go! Three boar kebabs!”

“Thanks.”

I paid for the food and accepted three skewers from the chef outside the shop. Yup, they looked huge, and they got a lot of points for the charred sauce spotting the meat—the chef really understood how to barbecue. *This place certainly lives up to Kewlny and Ficelle’s stamp of approval.*

“Okay Master! Let’s eat!”

“Mm. Thanks for the food.”

“Yup, here you go. Let’s dig in.”

KewlNy took a hearty bite, whereas Ficelle nibbled at the edges. They were complete opposites, even in the ways they ate. They hadn’t seemed particularly close or distant to each other during their days at the dojo, though maybe they’d had more chances to interact here in the capital. It didn’t really matter. I wasn’t about to prod into their private affairs, and there was nothing better than people getting along.

“Mm. Delicious.”

I took a bite of the boar skewer. The thick chunk of meat melted in my mouth with surprising tenderness. *Hmm, they must’ve thoroughly marinated the boar before cooking it.* A chef who could make boar meat *this* tender was no ordinary man. With each bite, juices seeped out, mixing with the fragrant sauce and coating my tongue with exquisite flavor. Seriously tasty stuff. I felt my cheeks weakening. *Ah, this is the life.*

“Mmmmmm! Delish!” KewlNy gushed.

“Make sure to look where you’re walking,” I advised.

Ficelle shook her head. “Jeez, KewlNy, it’s hard to watch you sometimes.”

“Mrgh! How rude!” KewlNy complained. “*I am* a knight, you know?!”

We strolled away from the kebab shop, all the while badgering each other.



“Hm?”

We were making our way to the stagecoach at a relaxed pace and enjoying our meal, when suddenly, we heard a ruckus ahead of us. Somehow, unlike the hustle and bustle of the thriving commercial district, this commotion was really noisy.

A scream resounded over the crowd. “He’s a pickpocket! Someone catch him!”

A pickpocket, huh? We didn’t have any idiots like that out in Beaden. I guess thugs really did come out in the city. I turned to the source of the voice and spotted a man weaving his way through the crowd, running away from a not-too-distant street stall. He repeatedly glanced behind him while cleanly avoiding the people in front of him. *That’s probably the culprit.* Judging by his behavior, this wasn’t his first time—there was no hesitation in his movements.

“Now, what to do at times like these?” I muttered.

Coincidentally, the pickpocket was running right toward us. Would it be best to catch him? I didn’t approve of his actions, after all. Theft was a crime. That was perfectly obvious.

“Mm. I’ll do it,” Ficelle said. “No need for you to bother with this, Master.”

“Ha ha ha, you sure have a high opinion of me.”

No need to bother? What exactly does everyone see in me?

“KewlNy, hold this.”

“Righto!”

Ficelle handed her skewer to KewlNy, then pulled her longsword from her robe.

“Ficelle, won’t it be bad to use a real blade?” I asked.

“It’s fine. Leave it to me.”

Ficelle paid me no mind and readied her sword. KewlNy seemed to trust her and was acting carefree, standing with a kebab in each hand.

“Outta the way!”

The pickpocket sprinted closer. He was a perfectly normal-looking man with a medium build. He looked somewhat younger than me, and he ran at a significant speed while threatening everyone around him. Judging by his attire, he wasn't particularly well-off. Well, anyone who cared about their outward appearance wouldn't go around picking pockets.

Despite him gathering a lot of attention, nobody was making a move to try and stop him. Everyone just watched, as if the situation had nothing to do with them. *I guess that's simply how the big city is.* In Beaden, any crime would have the entire village beating you to a pulp, but I suppose that was simply a difference in culture. Nevertheless, crimes had to be punished, regardless of where you were. That was common sense.

"Hah!"

Ficelle exhaled sharply and unsheathed her longsword in a smooth slash. I spied *something* flying from the edge of her blade and managed to trace it with my eyes.

"Hey! I'm tellin' ya! Get the hell out of— Ugh?!"

The moment that Ficelle's attack—the *something* she'd shot from her sword—reached the pickpocket's legs, the man tumbled. It was as though he'd tripped over an invisible obstacle.

"What was that?" I asked.

It was probably magic, but as far as I could see, the spell had no lethal force. *That's awfully convenient in cases like these.* I watched on like any other unrelated spectator.

"I sent a slash attack flying out like a projectile," Ficelle explained casually. "It would be problematic to cut off his legs though, so I only sent the force of impact, not the cutting edge."

She didn't make it sound like anything special. And I guess, to her, it wasn't—in her mind, she'd done something that was perfectly natural. However, to everyone else, her attack was something amazing. Magic was crazy.

"Kewlny, take care of the rest," she said.

“Sure! You hold on to these!” Kewlmy passed over the kebabs.

These two are perfectly in sync. Kewlmy went to the fallen pickpocket and immediately held him down. She was really light-footed and skilled, and this didn’t look like her first time arresting someone.

“Wh-Who the hell?! Dammit!”

“The Liberion Order. Give yourself up quietly.”

Kewlmy’s tone was the same as usual, but somehow, it sounded far more chilling. I was a little surprised she could talk like that.

“You’re amazing, Ficelle.” I wanted to praise her for how easily she’d taken down the pickpocket. “That was nuts.”

“Not true,” she replied curtly. “That was the most basic of basics...” She then pulled her robe around her and turned her face away.

Yup, this old man screwed up.

“Is this the kinda thing you two do for work?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. The order and the magic corps are under the nation’s jurisdiction. We have the authority to handle cases like these too.”

It was pretty obvious that the order and the magic corps had such facets to them, but I never thought I’d witness it for myself. I’d given a lot of thought to catching the pickpocket, but these two had acted immediately. They certainly lived up to their positions.

“Does this kinda thing happen often in Baltrain?” As usual, I was being a total country bumpkin, but I was curious. This kind of issue was extremely rare out in the sticks. And now that I thought about it, I was honestly quite ignorant regarding public order in the capital.

“It depends on what district of the city you’re in,” Ficelle explained. She’d apparently decided that her part in this mess was over, and she’d gone back to eating her meat. “The western district has many shops and people, so it happens here every now and then.”

“I see...”

Well, many people gathered in Baltrain, so it wasn't strange for criminals to be among them. After all, not everyone out there was a good person. As a swordsmanship instructor, that idea gave me mixed feelings.

"Master! Fice! Go ahead of me!" KewlNy shouted, leading the pickpocket away with his hands tied behind his back. "I need to bring him in!"

"So she says. You good with that?" I asked Ficelle.

"Mm. I don't mind."

Both KewlNy and Ficelle were really accustomed to this. By all rights, Ficelle should be going with KewlNy—even if her attack had only been a long-distance shock wave, she had still been involved. *Feels tactless to bring that up, though.* KewlNy probably knew that and decided to take him in alone anyway.

Stirred by a sense of parental affection, I said, "Guess I'll have to treat KewlNy to something again later."

"You're spoiling her," Ficelle retorted.

"Ha ha ha! How strict." *So I can't treat KewlNy? Guess I can't. She's really doing her best, though.*

With such thoughts in mind, I watched KewlNy take the man away. It was amazing. She had a firm hold of him, and despite her petite build, she possessed significant strength.

"Shall we?"

"Mm."

There was nothing else to be done at this point. We couldn't just stand here all day, so our only choice was to call it and go home.

Ultimately, that was how we'd witnessed a bit of trouble while eating meat on the go.

"What do we do about KewlNy's kebab...?" Ficelle asked.

"Aaah..."

After staring at the half-eaten meat skewer she'd left behind, we each headed our separate ways.



“Hwaaah...”

The morning light poured through the window, waking my mind. It was still just past the crack of dawn. I got up and looked down at the city from the window, but there was hardly any pedestrian traffic outside. As a younger man, I’d always been the type to go to sleep early and wake up early, but I felt like I’d been losing my grip on that over the last few years. Was this what it was like to get old?

I quickly got dressed and descended from the second floor of the inn to the lobby. This inn had been described to me as cheap, but compared to the public lodgings all the way out in Beaden, it was very well-built.

“Well, it’s pretty rude to compare them,” I mumbled as I walked down the stairs. Even the most rotten of inns in Baltrain’s central district had to maintain pretty high standards. Otherwise, it would be out of business fast.

Seated at the front counter was the inn’s owner. “Good morning, Mr. Gardinant,” he said. “You’re up early as usual.”

“Yeah, good morning. It’s a habit.”

I was thinking of having a simple meal before taking an early morning stroll. After walking around with Kewlmy and Ficelle the other day, I figured it’d be nice to learn a little more about Baltrain as a whole. It would be entirely possible for me to come across even more interesting sights.

“The same as usual, please,” I said.

“Right away, sir.”

It’d been some time since I’d chosen this inn as my base. The owner already had a grasp of my routine, so he could prepare my breakfast menu despite my vague request. That felt pretty nice, in its own way. Made me feel like a regular—a regular for nothing more than an inn, though.

“Thanks for the meal.”

A simple breakfast was placed before me, and I smacked my lips lightly at the food, which consisted of bread, bacon, eggs, salad, and milk. Simple though it

was, the quality of the ingredients and the overall taste were exceptional. *As expected of an inn in the central district.*

“Okay, time to get going.”

I hyped myself up—well, maybe that’s a bit of an exaggeration—and left the inn to take a breather. I started by walking toward a line of somewhat tall buildings. This road was narrower than the main streets, but still neatly paved and maintained, reminding me that I was still in such a glorious city. I figured I would just wander around aimlessly for a while. After all, I still had a lot of time before the knights began their training.

“Mmm, nice weather today. The air tastes great.”

After walking for a bit, I came out onto a large, empty street. Even though this was a main thoroughfare, it was too early for any carriages to be rolling about, and pedestrians were very sparse.

“I guess this part of town is pretty old.”

I hadn’t taken a good look around before this, but none of the buildings seemed particularly new. Judging by the state of their walls, they’d seen quite a few years. This was the central district, so it’d probably been Liberis’s core for ages. It was natural to assume that the city had expanded into four other districts throughout the course of history.

“You there.”

I wasn’t a cultural specialist or a historian or anything, so I had no way of knowing the details of Baltrain’s development. Still, it was a nice exercise to let my thoughts drift in such directions.

“You. Hey! Will you stop already?”

Since I’m already out, maybe it would be nice to visit Liberis’s palace for the first time in a while. Seeing that old castle might jog my memories of the place and move me in some way.

“Don’t ignore me!”

“Whoa?!” I panicked at the sudden, loud voice. *That scared the crap outta me!* I’d been hearing someone talk for a while now, but I hadn’t even

considered that anyone would call out to *me*.

“Umm... Do you need something, little lady?”

When I turned around, I was somewhat taken aback by the person I found standing there. It was a little girl who looked no older than ten. She had glamorous blonde hair that flowed down to her waist, glimmering in the morning sun. Her white, nearly transparent skin was dazzling, and she was a great image of good health. Also, her clothing boldly exposed her thighs and shoulders. Outfits like this didn't exist in the countryside. The novelty of her clothes alone tripped me up, but even at a glance, I could tell right away that they were of extremely high quality. Delicate embroidery was dotted here and there along the surface of the fabric, and though the garment itself was somewhat short, you could describe the piece as a robe, which emphasized her sweet figure even more. That was the overall impression I got of her.

“Who are you calling a little lady?!” she yelled. “Good grief... You would be Beryl Gardinant, correct?”

“I am... What about it?”

This girl apparently didn't like being treated like a child, but she was so young that I couldn't help it. More importantly, I was surprised that such a little girl would know my name.

“I'm Lucy Diamond,” she said. “I serve as the commander of the Liberis Kingdom's magic corps.”

“So the little lady's name is Lucy, huh?”

“Listen to me already! And quit calling me little!”

This little girl is the magic corps's commander? Ha ha ha, what a great joke. She was dressed like a wizard, so she was probably at the age where she really looked up to them and wanted to be one when she grew up. As a child, I'd been similar—I used to stage fake sword fights with my friends in the village. *What a nostalgic memory.*

“Gah! I'm not getting through to you!” Lucy shouted. “How about this?!”

She immediately held up her hand. I thought she was just playing around,

but...

“Hm...? Whoa?!”

A flame burst from her palm. It scorched the air, unleashing a violent sound that dredged up an instinctive fear. The surrounding area was illuminated by the flames as they grew brighter and brighter.



“Do you understand now?” Lucy asked.

“Uhh... What? Seriously?”

She casually pointed at me with a hand that was quite literally incandescent. *No way. Seriously? This kid really is the magic corps’s commander?* That organization was under the direct jurisdiction of the nation—Ficelle was a part of it too. They were one of our primary military forces, and they wielded a reputation on par with the Liberion Order.

“Well, you’re obviously not some nobody,” I said.

“Hmph. That’s right, that’s right.”

I had no way of confirming the veracity of her claim, so for now, I simply decided that the girl before me was no child.

“But setting that aside,” I continued, “I don’t think you should be casting fire like that out here in the middle of town.”

“Erk... Mrgh...”

Being a wizard didn’t mean she had license to suddenly stoke a blaze in the middle of the street. What was she planning to do if it spread? I understood her desire to get me to acknowledge her power, but as a regular old man, I couldn’t turn a blind eye to such dangerous acts.

“So, um...Lucy? Did you need something?”

“Ooh, yes, right.”

It turned out that she really hated the “little lady” stuff, so I decided to cut it out. She was still a young girl in my eyes, but it’d be problematic if she suddenly threw a tantrum and burned me. After putting out the fire in her left hand, Lucy got back to why she’d called out to me in the first place, acting like she’d just remembered her purpose.

“I heard about you from Fice,” she said. “I shall be borrowing you for a moment.”

I’d vaguely expected this, based on her knowledge of my name. *Guess she has business with me personally.* I had no idea what that business could be, though.

“You have time now, don’t you?” she stated.

“Well... I guess I do.”

She’d appeared out of nowhere and immediately demanded my time. Her pushy behavior left me with no room to refuse. Despite being so small, this girl was really haughty and overbearing. How had her parents raised her?

“You’ve been personally requisitioned by the commander of the magic corps,” she said. “Feel free to act more grateful.”

“Ha ha ha. Let’s go with that.”

Oh well. I didn’t have any specific plans for the morning anyway, so it wasn’t a terrible idea to follow Lucy while enjoying the sights of the capital. Though, I had no idea where she was planning to take me. An old man in his forties was now going for an early morning stroll with a girl who looked just around ten. Hmm. I’d agreed and decided to go with the flow, but...didn’t this look pretty suspicious from an outsider’s perspective? If possible, I wanted to avoid being questioned by the knights or the local garrison.

“Also, stop treating me like a child,” Lucy added. “I’m probably far older than you are.”

“Huh?”

Another terrific joke. No matter how I looked at her, Lucy was a little girl. She was, of course, far prettier than any of the girls in the countryside, so she was sure to grow up into a fine beauty one day. She had extraordinary material to work with. Her beauty was different from Allusia’s, but she still wouldn’t have any shortage of prospective grooms in the future. Anyway... *Her*, older than *me*? I was turning forty-five this year.

“You don’t believe me, huh?” Lucy asked, her expression more of a bitter smile than disgruntled. “Well, if it looks that way to you, we’ll just leave it at that.”

“Oh come on, how can anyone believe you?”

After giving it some more thought, I realized that her conduct and the atmosphere around her didn’t match what I’d expect from a youth. I’d been

focused mostly on her appearance, which had left a rather strong impression, and I hadn't been able to focus on her less tangible attributes until she'd brought up her age. She'd also used magic earlier, so for now, I decided to recognize her as no ordinary girl. Frankly, I didn't want to start an argument for no reason, especially when faced with a child.

"Well, enough of that," Lucy said. "Just as I mentioned earlier, I've heard about you from Fice."

"Oh, you mean Ficelle?" I asked.

"That's right."

As it turned out, everyone called her Fice, just like Kewlmy did. I never used nicknames for people, so in a way, this was a fresh experience. Ficelle had been one of my precious pupils, but as her instructor, I'd been required to keep a proper distance between us. As such, I called everyone by their proper names.

"Fice has really been enjoying herself lately," Lucy muttered. "It's likely because she met you."

"That so...? It'd be nice if that was the case."

Lucy's expression wasn't that of a little girl by any margin. Setting aside what the truth was, the mystery of her being older than she looked was deepening by the minute.

"From what I hear, you're Fice's master," she stated.

"Mm-hmm. That's right. I've got no clue about magic, though."

The two of us began walking as we chatted. She hadn't told me where we were going or what her goal was, but judging by her gait, she had a clear destination in mind.

"Fice's sword magic is outstanding, you see," Lucy said. "She does, of course, have a talent for magic, but her swordplay is also considerable. She must've had an excellent teacher."

"I'm not all that impressive," I casually responded. "Ficelle's skills are the fruits of her own efforts."

I wouldn't go as far as saying I'd had *zero* involvement in her growth, but a

large portion of what Ficelle had gained was thanks to her own talent and hard work. I had no intention of making the outrageous claim that her strength had developed only because of me.

“Now then, I suppose *this* place will suffice,” Lucy said, coming to a stop.

“Is there something around here...?”

I didn’t know how long we’d been walking. Our destination was sparsely populated by somewhat small buildings—at least, small for the capital. In terms of the central district, this spot was practically deserted. The sun was peeking over the horizon, so quite a lot of time had passed, but there was still nobody in sight. An almost complete silence hung over the area. It was surprising that a place like this existed in the middle of Baltrain.

“I love magic, you see,” Lucy began, turning to me with a mysterious expression. She looked both delighted and anguished. If she truly was the age she appeared to be, it would’ve been impossible for her to make such a bewitching face. “I study and research it every day.”

“I get where you’re coming from. I swing my sword every day too.”

Swordsmanship was relatively simple, but swinging a sword around recklessly didn’t make you a better swordsman. Magic had to be far more complicated in that regard. A wizard’s skill set was built upon the foundational wisdom of pioneers, and modern magical practitioners accumulated vast knowledge by running countless trials. Even now, the art was constantly expanding and developing.

“Perhaps it’s simply my nature,” Lucy continued, “But I want to get a real feel for my growth. I want to test the results of my research. That’s all I ever have on my mind.”

“The same goes for swordsmanship. It’s important to experience your own improvement.”

A small fire popped into existence in Lucy’s left hand. This wasn’t the huge blaze she’d created earlier—it was only about the size of her fist.

“I want to test it.” She maintained her bewitching smile, but suddenly, bloodlust overtook her. “Against a *strong* opponent.”

“Hm?!”

Was it my intuition as a swordsman? Or my instinct as a human? I immediately jumped to the side as a flame burst into the spot where I’d just been standing.

“Hmm. A fast reaction, just as expected. You live up to being Fice’s master.” Lucy held up her other hand. Matching the movement of her arm, multiple flames formed and took shape.

“You’re not joking, are you?!” I exclaimed.

What do I do? Draw my sword? If I took her words at face value, this was likely just a test of her abilities. I didn’t know what kind of conversation she’d had with Ficelle, but Ficelle was an active wizard in the magic corps who practiced sword magic. Her stories of me as an instructor must’ve caught Lucy’s interest.

However, I wasn’t carrying a wooden sword—my weapon was steel, and it could certainly draw blood. I was sensing some serious aggression from her, and I deduced that she wasn’t throwing around that fire for fun. But how serious was she? I had no way of measuring.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy asked. “There’s no need to hold anything back. Come at me.”

“I’m not in the mood, okay?!”

I wasn’t sure whether Lucy was no longer able to keep up appearances or if she’d simply chosen to throw them away. Her tone was calm, but it looked like she was having a problem keeping her lips from curving into a smile. The disconnect between her ecstatic expression and her childish features made her seem even more lascivious.

Seriously, my life had been nothing but a series of surprises ever since coming to Baltrain. There’d been Allusia, Selna, and now Lucy. Why did so many strong people who’d found great success in life have to get involved with me like this?!

“I’m not as strong as they say,” I muttered.

“What an odd thing to claim.”

Seriously, what's so odd about it? It ain't odd at all!

After a short moment's hesitation, I chose to draw my sword. I'd tried to emphasize that I wasn't strong, but this was the behavior I'd come to expect from her—she wasn't going to listen to anything I had to say.

"Let's begin!" Lucy exclaimed.

"I don't want to start anything, though!"

Goddammit! Whatever! Spitting out all the complaints I could manage, I kicked off the ground toward her.

"Hup!"

"Whoa?!"

I wanted to close in immediately, swing my sword, and bring an end to this quickly, but a sudden wall of fire blocked my path.

"I'll be at a disadvantage if I allow you to approach so easily," she said.

"Magic sure is convenient!" I yelled back bitterly.

From a swordsman's perspective, the ability to launch attacks from a distance without leaving any openings was a mouthwatering proposition. Watching Lucy mercilessly do just that filled me with respect, awe, and a bit of "What the heck are you doing?!" indignation.

"C'mon! C'mon! C'mon! C'mon!" she chanted.

"Ugh... You little...!"

The battle was an incessant rain of magic, magic, and more magic. Fire coiled around me, icy winds blew past, and thunder shook the air. Using nothing but my legs, I ran through that hellish landscape. Never in my life had I fought a wizard. I'd only experienced combat in mock battles with my pupils and knights, as well as fighting the wild animals and monsters that loitered around the village. Before coming to the capital, I'd never even met anyone capable of wielding magic. As such, being forced into a fight with Lucy was teaching me something—swordsmen had about the worst compatibility possible against wizards.

“Shah!”

I bisected a lump of ice that’d been closing in on me. *Holy crap! That was close! A second later and I’d have been a crushed pancake!*

“Ooh, you cut through that?! Ha ha ha! This is great!”

“Do all wizards throw out magic willy-nilly like this?!” I complained on impulse as I dodged flames, cut ice, and sidestepped bolts of lightning. Seriously, I doubted a court magician would have such a vast array of effects to put on show.

“Of course not! There aren’t many capable of this much output!”

The battle had begun due to Lucy’s one-sided declaration. Our starting positions had put us within hand’s span of each other, but now, I found myself at a distance, unable to get closer. I spent the entire time desperately fending off the magical bombardment while she remained outside the range of my sword.

If I’d been faced with an attack that had more physical substance, I would’ve been able to cut it down and advance. However, there were many types of magic that couldn’t be physically blocked with a sword. What’s more, the magical downpour assaulting me was incessant. I wasn’t sure whether all wizards were capable of this, or just Lucy, but quite honestly, her magic forced me into a very difficult position.

“I wouldn’t mind a little pity for the elderly!” I yelled.

“Hmph, what’re you saying?” Lucy scoffed. “I told you—I’m older than you!”

The instant I tried to step forward, a flaming flower bloomed from the ground, causing me to stumble. I’d become keenly aware of something—physically defending against magic was hard, but dodging it was even harder. There was no defined “origin” for magic like there was for a conventional weapon. She did hold up her hand before casting anything, but that wasn’t enough to predict when and where the attack would sprout from. The only choice was to dodge after the magic was already mid flight, which was pretty stressful.

“How about this?!” Lucy exclaimed.

“Goddammit!”

Adding to the fire, ice, and lightning, she was now using something like a pressurized water beam. I blocked it with the flat of my longsword and diverted its trajectory. Unlike fire and lightning, water had physical substance, so even if it was magic, it was far easier to deal with using a weapon.

“Hmm, to think you’d be able to handle even *that*,” Lucy remarked. “Not bad.”

“You sure are acting smug!”

Nobody had asked for a dance with magic projectiles. Given the chance, I’d rather have a wonderful dance with a cute girl. *Not that I’ve ever learned to dance.*

Anyway, if someone were watching this fight, they’d probably think that Lucy and I were evenly matched. Both of us were lacking the means to deal a decisive blow. I couldn’t get close to Lucy, so I had no way of attacking her. Lucy was incapable of hitting me with her magic, so she couldn’t finish me off.

In all likelihood, she possessed the power to blast magic over a wider range, but this wasn’t a serious fight to the death. In a sense, it was just a test to compare abilities. And also, if she widened the effect of her magic, it would deal considerable damage to the city around us. She understood this well—I could tell she was restricting herself to magic that only targeted a single individual.

“I never intended to get *this* into it...” Lucy murmured, observing me as I dodged a fireball by leaning to the side. “So, this one’s just for you.”

“Hm...?”

Is now my chance to close the distance? I don’t know what she means by “getting into it,” but she seems to be easing up on the offense. It would be going too far to cut her down, so knocking her out with my hilt would probably be enough to bring a full stop to this meaningless fight.

I was soaking wet from water magic. My bangs were a little singed from all the fire. My clothes were somewhat scorched from the lightning. It wasn’t a good idea to let this battle drag on any longer.

“Wha?!”

The instant I was about to step forward to close the distance, I felt a horrible chill, and the worst of premonitions forced my entire body to dart to the side.

“My goodness... You even dodged *that*?”

Not even a second later, space twisted where I’d been standing. *Holy crap! Way too close! The hell was that?! It wasn’t near as shoddy as fire or water!* It was as if something had eaten space itself. I think if my torso had gotten caught in that, it would be a total mess right now. I felt tremendous fear toward whatever magic she’d just used.

“Haaah... Stop! Stop! We’re done!” Lucy cried out.

Just as I was gulping at that previous, unheard-of attack, Lucy abruptly brought an end to this useless tussle—one she’d dragged me into to begin with. She was even acting like she wasn’t the one who’d started it.

“You satisfied?” I asked.

Lucy casually held up both her arms in the air. *I’m not satisfied, though! I’m full of complaints! Who the hell is amused by suddenly dragging people into some inexplicable fight?! I’m not a battle maniac, dammit!*

“Indeed,” Lucy answered, looking awfully refreshed. “Though I got a little too serious at the end. If you’re capable of dodging that spell, then I’m not capable of striking you down through conventional means.”

“Thanks for the high praise...” My shoulders slumped. *Guess she managed to test out her magic experiment or research of whatever.* I never wanted to face her again, though.

“Just to ask,” I said. “What would’ve happened if that spell had hit me?”

Fire, water, and lightning could be witnessed as natural phenomena, so even if this was my first fight against a wizard, I had some basis for knowing what to expect. However, that last attack was completely beyond my ability to rationalize.

“Hm? Normally, the affected body part would be blown off, and that’d be the end of it,” she answered. “But relax. I adjusted it so that your body wouldn’t

have ended up that way.”

“Uh... Is that so...?”

Scary. Don't pull that kinda crap outta nowhere! Even if it's the adjusted version, how am I supposed to know any of that?

“At any rate, you certainly are strong,” Lucy said. “I understand why Fice admires you.”

“Not at all. You’re praising me too highly,” I retorted, shaking my head. “In a fight where anything goes, I’m sure you could’ve finished me off at any moment.”

With as much power as Lucy possessed, she could’ve defeated me many times over. If she’d just drowned this entire area in fire, I’d have been a crumpled heap on the ground after one shot. Though, that was only if her goal was to kill me. When it came to testing things out, like during this fight, that method would’ve been inappropriate.

Lucy giggled. “Hee hee... So you’re not angry?”

“Hm? Aah... Well, let me just say—you were a total pain in the ass.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Sorry about that!”

Someone beyond my abilities had suddenly picked a fight. She’d put me in a disadvantageous position and had even gone so far that one misstep could’ve spelled my death. Normally, the correct reaction would be to scream about how unreasonable she’d been, but somehow, I wasn’t in the mood to do anything like that.

Perhaps it was simple exhaustion. Perhaps resignation. After all, now that the fight was over, it was useless to complain. Maybe I was simply moved after witnessing magic for the first time ever. My mind was a mess of emotions, but for some reason, I didn’t feel angry.

“Well, how do I put it?” Lucy said. “I do know I’m in the wrong for picking a fight. As an apology, please come by the magic institute one day. I’ll be able to make it worth your while.”

“I have no talent for magic, though...” I mumbled. “Well, I’ll drop by if I get

the chance.”

The magic institute was something like a training school for wizards managed by the kingdom. All those capable of actually using magic were valuable, so the country poured resources into securing personnel with that talent. As the commander of the magic corps, it made sense for Lucy to have a lot of influence in the institute.

That said, I wasn’t sure how magic could be of any use to a swordsman like me. Still, you could say that I’d formed a connection with the head of the magic corps without suffering any real damage. And now that the capital was my base of operations, it *was* best to be accommodating. Not that I really did anything here—I was just an old instructor from the countryside.

“Oh right, once my research on new magic advances, I insist you serve as my opponent again,” Lucy said.

“Ah, I refuse outright,” I replied immediately.

“Why?! Didn’t you have a little fun too?!”

“This and that are different matters!” I didn’t have enough lives to take part in such dangerous work.

And so, that was how I met Lucy. It was also how a hell of a morning passed me by.

Chapter 3: An Old Country Bumpkin Faces a Dungeon

“Ah, Master Beryl. Hello.”

“Hey, Ficelle.”

One day, I was making my way to the order’s training hall, ready to dedicate myself to practice as usual. As I approached the order’s office, I happened across a member of the magic corps.

“I see you’re carrying some crazy luggage,” I remarked.

“Aah, this? It’s a delivery for the order,” Ficelle explained.

“A delivery?”

Ficelle was wearing the same robe as usual, but she carried fairly large bags in her hands and slung across her back. I could tell they were all quite heavy.

“Potions,” Ficelle elaborated. “The magic corps sells them to the order wholesale.”

“Hmm, potions, huh?”

Ficelle took a breath, releasing the luggage in her hands. Listening carefully, I heard the sound of glass clinking together, making it apparent that there were bottles inside. Potions were a form of medicine that were widely used to heal wounds. Drinking one temporarily boosted your natural healing, and they could also be directly applied to grievous injuries.

“Since they’re being delivered by the magic corps, I guess...they’re magic potions?” I asked.

“Yup. But some are regular ones made from plants.”

There were several types of potions. To generalize, some were decocted from medicinal plants, others were plant-based and then further treated with magic, and finally, a select few were refined entirely through magic. The more magic

was involved, the more drastic the effect, and the steeper the price.

In Beaden, you could only find potions made from plants. Magically refined potions were just that valuable. I'd heard that these types of potions existed, but I'd never seen one for myself. Even a village herbalist was capable of making potions from medicinal plants, but those that involved magic were a different matter—they obviously couldn't be made without the ability to use magic, so the supply was limited. Naturally, scarcity raised prices.

Because of my job as a sword instructor, I owed a lot to potions. Scratches and grazes were pretty much an everyday occurrence, and when it came to healing injuries, not having a potion versus having one was like night and day.

"Oh yeah," I said, suddenly remembering something. "I met a person called Lucy the other day."

Speaking of the magic corps, there was that Lucy girl who'd suddenly picked a fight with me. In the end, I never figured out if she really was the commander. She *was* definitely a wizard, though. Either way, Ficelle probably knew something about her.

"Commander Lucy?" she asked.

"Aah, so she really *is* your commander."

"Mm-hmm."

It turned out Lucy wasn't lying about being the magic corps's commander. In that case, the next thing that bothered me was her appearance and behavior. She seriously looked like a ten-year-old girl, but judging by the atmosphere she draped herself in and the magic she used, it was hard to believe that she was as young as she appeared. If she was older than me, as she claimed, that would put her in her forties...at least. No matter how I viewed it, the inside didn't match the outside with that one.

"She said she's older than me," I added. "I wonder if that's really true?"

"Aah, about—"

"Lucy uses magic to maintain her appearance," another voice interrupted, cutting Ficelle off.

“Oh, hey there, Allusia,” I said.

“Hello. And Ficelle, thank you for your hard work.”

“This is...my job,” Ficelle replied.

Allusia had apparently been listening to some of our conversation and had stepped outside to join in. Strangely, Ficelle was curling in on herself a little. She looked pretty cute like that.

“Using magic to maintain her appearance?” I asked. “That’s pretty crazy.”

“It is,” Allusia agreed. “She’s been the magic corps’s commander since before I became the knight commander. She hasn’t changed at all since, at least physically. It’s quite the mystery.”

It turned out that Lucy was, in fact, my age or older. *Hmm. I suppose anything goes with magic.* I had no talent for it whatsoever, so I’d already given up on using any myself, but I had to admit that I did feel somewhat jealous. Both Ficelle’s sword magic and Lucy’s...rejuvenation? Maintenance? Well, they really gave a glimpse at how wide the breadth of magic was. It sure sounded nice.

“Anyway, how did you meet Lucy, Master?” Allusia asked. “Did you go to the magic institute?”

“Aah, about that...”

I didn’t really want to spread it around, but I felt like it was fine to tell Allusia and Ficelle. I briefly explained my meeting with Lucy and the sudden trial of abilities, my voice somewhat exasperated the whole time. Allusia’s eyes widened as I spoke, whereas Ficelle awkwardly hung her head.

“That does...sound a lot like Lucy,” Allusia said.

“You mean she’s always like that?” I asked.

Allusia nodded. “She is. She loves testing out her magic...”

My shoulders slumped. I was surprised that Lucy managed to function properly as the magic corps’s commander when she behaved like that. Maybe she normally kept that side of herself suppressed. However, when she’d fought me, she’d acted like she couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“Sorry, Master Beryl,” Ficelle said. “It’s all because I told her about you.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “There’s nothing for you to apologize for. If anyone is at fault, it’s clearly Lucy. What exactly did you say to her, anyway?”

Lucy had mentioned hearing about my skill from Ficelle, so Ficelle had definitely been the one to tell her about me. Regardless, I couldn’t blame Ficelle—Lucy had picked that fight because of her own high estimation of my strength. Still, I was somewhat suspicious... How exactly had Ficelle described me?

“That’s a secret...” Ficelle muttered.

“I-I see...”

If she was going to be tight-lipped about the matter, then there wasn’t much more I could ask. I possessed no techniques to force the truth out of her. A maiden’s secret had to be kept hidden above all else. Not that I truly understood that concept...

“By the way, what’re you doing out here, Allusia?” I asked. This was the order’s office, and there was frankly no need for the knight commander to be coming out during work hours.

“I have something to discuss with Lysandra,” she answered.

“With Selna?”

For some reason, this was related to my other former pupil. Even a black rank adventurer couldn’t just waltz into the order’s office, so I supposed they had arranged to meet outside.

And as we chatted away, a familiar red-haired woman came walking down the street toward us.

“Citrus, sorry to keep you... Oh, you’re here too, Master?”

“Lysandra, what do you want?” Allusia asked bitterly. “I don’t exactly have free time.”

“Don’t rush me,” Selna replied. “Besides, Master Beryl being here works out perfectly.”

Perhaps out of habit, Selna brushed back her red hair and admonished Allusia.

Hang on, she has business with me too? What could it be?

“In that case, I’ll carry these potions inside,” Ficelle said.

“Aah, be careful,” I told her.

“Mm.”

Having been in the middle of a delivery for work, Ficelle got back to it. Well, her unintended break had been my fault—I’d stopped her to chat.

“So? What do you want?” Allusia asked again.

It was now just me, Allusia, and Selna out here. As usual, this was an unbalanced lineup, but being right outside the order’s office meant that I didn’t have to worry about onlookers. The attention these two gathered was very painful to endure.

“As a matter of fact, the adventurer’s guild would like to borrow Master Beryl,” Selna explained. “I’m here to get permission. I have a letter from the guild master too.”

“Why?”

Seriously, why? My complaint was carried away by the wind.

Allusia scoffed, staring at the letter. “Tch. Looks like it isn’t fake.”

“Obviously. Forgery is a serious crime,” Selna retorted.

I had no idea whether the letter was the real thing, but according to Allusia, it was. Also, was it just my imagination, or had I heard a click of the tongue that would’ve been *very* inappropriate coming from the knight commander? *Hm... Must’ve been my imagination. Allusia wouldn’t do that. Yup, she sure wouldn’t.*

“So? What does it say?” I asked curiously.

I could’ve read it for myself, but I didn’t want to peek without asking. According to Allusia and Selna, this was a letter addressed to the Liberion Order from the adventurer’s guild. *Probably not meant for my eyes.*

I’d settled into my role as the special instructor for the order, but my position itself was pretty complicated. It wasn’t like I had any command or authority. At most, I was here to help the knights train, so I had no place interjecting myself

when it came to internal affairs or the deployment of force.

Obviously, I was affiliated with the Liberion Order now, so it was the knight commander who decided how I was used. Their lieutenant commander, Henbrits, probably had that authority too. It was a mystery why the guild master wanted to borrow me, but if that was true, Allusia would be the one to give the final say. There was no way the adventurer's guild could make this decision for her.

"It says they want to borrow your strength to help raise some of the new and young adventurers," Allusia explained. "The order doesn't really have a reason to refuse, but we don't have any reason to agree either."

"Teaching newcomers, huh?"

This piqued my interest, but just as Allusia said, the order had no reason to go out of their way to hand over their instructor. Besides, weren't survival skills and such more important for novice adventurers than sword skills? I kind of felt like what I would be teaching would clash with what they actually needed. And, on top of all that, it was weird for the guild master, whom I'd never met, to ask to borrow me by name. I wasn't involved with the guild in any capacity.

"Don't tell me..." I muttered. "Selna?"

"Of course," she replied. "I made the recommendation."

"Don't 'of course' me..."

Cut it out with that triumphant look. I get enough of that crap from Allusia already. What am I gonna teach a bunch of adventurers, anyway? This is way too unreasonable.

"Citrus, don't you think this is a good opportunity to deepen the relationship between the adventurer's guild and the Liberion order?" Selna said. "I don't think it's a bad idea."

"I see. That's one way of looking at it." Allusia's expression shifted from that of my former pupil to one of a knight commander. She was likely considering what the order as an organization might gain by dispatching me.

"Still, I'm not really sure what you want help with," I told Selna.

“Naturally, if you don’t want to go, I’ll refuse immediately,” said Allusia.

I shot her a sideways glance. “You don’t have to be that eager.”

Personally, I was a little interested. I’d come a long way to live in Baltrain, so a part of me wanted to get involved. However, honestly speaking, instructing newbie adventurers would be worlds different from teaching swordsmanship at a dojo. I didn’t have the slightest idea what they expected me to do.

Also, since I was being temporarily loaned to the guild, it wasn’t like I was going to be teaching them continuously. I didn’t really do short courses or on-the-go training. Once I started teaching someone, I wanted to take the time to provide them with lasting instruction. Yet according to the nuance of this request, that didn’t seem possible.

“What, specifically, am I going to be doing?” I asked.

“The main component will be accompanying a group on a dungeon attack,” Selna answered. “You’ll be checking that they’ve properly acquired the combat skills needed to survive, and in the worst case, providing help on the front line.”

“A dungeon attack, huh?”

My expression turned unintentionally gloomy—I had a pretty bad memory about that. A long time ago, my youthful indiscretion had driven me to leave Beaden on my own expedition. I’d been really young at the time, and in the end, I’d gotten beaten to a pulp by the local monsters and had been forced to return home. I’m still surprised that the experience hadn’t left me dead.

A dungeon attack was exactly what it sounded like. It involved forcing your way through a ruin, labyrinth, cave, or anything of the like. The Glean continent had dungeons of all kinds. Some were the ruins of lost civilizations, some were areas under the effect of magical powers, and some were simple caves where monsters nested. They came in all shapes and sizes but were all classified as dungeons.

So, a dungeon attack was basically a dream for all wannabe adventurers. Monster parts could be traded for a good amount of money, and you could expect vast treasures from unexplored ruins. During a successful dungeon attack, it was possible to acquire great riches and fame—it was the kind of thing

that could completely change your life in one go.

However, dungeon attacks were obviously very dangerous. It wasn't unusual to be killed by monsters or caught in some ancient trap with nothing to do but wait for the end. If you misread your own abilities or how dangerous the dungeon was, those missteps could lead to certain death.

"You sure about that?" I asked. "Young adventurers and newcomers will be white or bronze...or silver at most, right?"

"That won't be a problem," Selna said. "The dungeon is under the guild's jurisdiction and has already been investigated. The monsters inside have been identified too. There should be no trouble so long as a suitable leader is with them."

"I'm pretty sure I don't qualify as that 'suitable leader,' though..."

Why do Allusia and Selna have such a needlessly high opinion of me?

"Given your strength, there won't be any problems whatsoever... Hmph."

"No, there could be plenty of problems."

I was just a boring old man. It would take everything I had just to defend myself. Protecting newcomers during a dungeon attack was setting the hurdle way too high. *Hmm. Maybe it's safest to refuse.* If the task was just *teaching* adventurers, then I would be willing, but I couldn't take responsibility for other people's lives. *If I was stronger, though, I would say yes on the spot.*

"Selna, sorry, but this sounds a little too—"

"Ooh, this is where you've been."

Just as I was about to refuse, someone cut me off.

"Hello, Lucy," Allusia said. "It's rare to see you here."

Lucy, the commander of the magic corps herself, now stood before us. "Mm," she acknowledged. "You see, I have something to discuss with the master of the adventurer's guild."

"A talk with the guildmaster? Does it have something to do with this?" Selna asked, showing off the letter.

“Hm...?” Lucy stared at the paper for a moment, then gave a huge nod. “Ooh, yes indeed. Exactly.”

The discussion aside, these three powerful figures had just started chatting as if it were perfectly natural. I suppose the knight commander, the commander of the magic corps, and the highest-ranking adventurer would’ve had the opportunity to become acquaintances already.



“Your recommendation involved a familiar name, so I put in a recommendation too,” Lucy explained.

“What?”

Lucyyy!

“So Master Beryl has been recommended by the guildmaster, a black rank adventurer, and even the commander of the magic corps...” Allusia murmured. “In that case, the order can’t really refuse to loan out our instructor.”

“Huh? Just a minute...” I protested. *Wait up. Hang in there, Allusia. Keep fighting! My life and the lives of the newbie adventurers are on the line here!*

“Then it’s decided,” Selna declared. “We’ll be borrowing Master Beryl for a while.”

“Very well,” Allusia agreed. “I’ll explain everything to the knights.”

Oh come on, there’s nothing “very well” about this. Despite being the concerned party, I had no voice in this decision. It’d been made without me.

Whatever! Just do what you want...



I made my way from the order’s office to the adventurer’s guild. Three of us were walking together: me, Selna, and, for some reason, Lucy.

Do you have a ton of free time, Lucy? Aren’t you the commander of the magic corps?

“I’m really grateful to get your cooperation, Master,” Selna whispered, a clear look of joy on her face. Selna gave off a masculine impression (though that didn’t detract from her beauty), so I didn’t think she’d be capable of an expression like that. If Kewlmy was a puppy, then Selna was a trained hunting dog. Though, in actuality, Selna was nowhere near that docile.

I chuckled weakly. “Ha... Ha ha ha... So you say, but I’m not sure how much the likes of me can actually help.”

“Say, have you not considered that you might be acting too humble?” Lucy asked me frankly.

“Not at all,” I replied. “I have a good read on my own capabilities.”

I didn’t know what to say about that. My sword skills were passable, but my physique wasn’t in any way exceptional—I was just a little stronger than the average person. I’d only beaten the Liberion Order’s lieutenant commander because my affinity was powerful against his style. Against Lucy, however, the battle had ended in a draw that was far closer to a loss. Considering all that, I was very reluctant to call myself *strong*.

“Well, that’s just one of Master Beryl’s virtues,” Selna said.

“Whatever...” I muttered. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

Lucy glanced over at Selna and giggled. “Hee hee hee. Lysandra, you seem rather fond of him.”

As usual, Selna was blindly devoted to me. But I just couldn’t get used to a world-traveling black rank adventurer praising me to the moon like this. Selna was definitely far beyond me in both social status and ability. *Please cut it out. This old man just wants to live a relaxing life.*

Also, with Selna and Lucy accompanying me, I was *once again* being stared at by everyone. It was painful. Maybe I should’ve been used to it already, but I still felt seriously out of place. Thankfully, the adventurer’s guild was just a short hop away from the order’s office, so we arrived quickly, chatting the whole way. Selna strode through with great familiarity while Lucy and I followed her. Seriously, why was Lucy still here? Did the magic corps have nothing better to do?

Selna made her way straight to the reception counter.

“It’s me. Is the guildmaster in?”

“Yes, please wait a moment.”

The receptionist immediately went to the back. *This seems to be common practice.* Not too long after, an old man with white hair came out—he was accompanied by a tall man wearing glasses who appeared to be his assistant.

“Hm-hmm, have I kept you waiting?” the old man asked.

“Guildmaster, I’ve brought Mr. Beryl Gardinant here,” Selna said.

It's probably best to start with introductions. "Um, yes, I'm Beryl Gardinant. A pleasure to meet you."

"I'm here too!" Lucy added. Frankly, I wouldn't have minded if she just left.

"The pleasure is mine," the old man said. "I am responsible for the Liberis branch of the adventurer's guild. My name is Nidus. The man next to me is my assistant, Meigen."

"Hello, I'm Meigen."

I returned their greetings with light handshakes. Nidus seemed to be around the same age as my dad. His hair and beard were pure white, and he had deep wrinkles. His manners seemed mild, but his posture and bearing were firm, meaning he either kept up with his training or had done so in the past. He *was* the guildmaster, so it made sense if he'd previously been an adventurer.

Contrary to the guildmaster's pleasant demeanor, after only the briefest of introductions, Meigen pointed a clearly suspicious gaze my way. He looked a little younger than me. His indigo hair was swept back neatly, and even through his glasses, I could see that he had a sharp glint in his eyes. His glare reminded me of when I'd first met Henbrits.

Well, even with Selna's recommendation, it was natural for people to be suspicious of an old bumpkin like me who'd appeared out of nowhere. What's more, I was being brought along to help raise new adventurers. It made sense that a member of the guild couldn't help but be extremely wary of an outsider. To him, it was probably very important that I was *worthy* of being entrusted with the lives of people in his employ—Meigen was assessing me to see whether I lived up to that standard. Personally, I found his stance perfectly respectable.

"With Twin Dragonblade Lysandra's recommendation, along with that of the commander of the magic corps, it's not my place to interject," Nidus said. "Our young ones will be in your care."

"R-Right..."

No, this is where you're supposed to interject. Tell them to hang on a sec! This is making me more anxious.

“Please wait a moment,” Meigen cut in coldly.

“Is something the matter?” Nidus asked.

Meigen sighed. “Having a recommendation from these two is indeed splendid...but we of the adventurer’s guild know nothing of Mr. Gardinant’s strength. It’s a little concerning to entrust the lives of valuable adventurers to someone whose reputation is merely hearsay.”

He’d quickly stated the bare truth. *That’s the spirit, Meigen! Keep it up!*

“You bastard,” spat Selna. “Are you saying you can’t trust my master?”

Lucy narrowed her eyes. “Hmm? Is *my* word not enough for you, Meigen?”

Selna’s attitude changed remarkably—Meigen had instantly incurred her wrath. Lucy was also beginning to exude a turbulent atmosphere.

Cut that out! I didn’t ask for this!

“That’s not what I meant,” Meigen said, retaining his cool despite the pressure from these overwhelming women. “I would simply like for you to demonstrate, in an easy-to-interpret manner, that Mr. Gardinant possesses the necessary qualifications.”

His sharp eyes pierced through me. That wasn’t enough to make me falter, though. What I sensed in his gaze wasn’t hostility, but a glimpse of his genuine concern for the adventurers.

“Hm. Then Meigen, what would you have us do?” Nidus asked casually, unperturbed by any of this.

At a glance, these two men looked like polar opposites, but they likely worked very well together when it came to managing the guild—they could both contribute their own perspectives and come to mutual agreements.

“From what I hear,” Meigen continued, “Mr. Gardinant is Twin Dragonblade Lysandra’s teacher. If the two of them have a bout, we’ll be able to see the extent of his capabilities.”

“Wuh?!”

A weird noise came from my throat. Seriously? I honestly doubted that I had

any chance against a black rank adventurer. I mean, it *was* a pretty good way of measuring my abilities...but after being placed on such a high pedestal, I felt a little guilty about my inevitable tumble.

“Ooh, what a great idea,” Lucy said. “I’d like to see that too.”

Don’t hop on board with it!

“If that’s what it’ll take, then I don’t mind either,” Selna agreed. “I could ask for nothing more than a bout with Master Beryl. I’ll give it everything I have.”

Cut that out. Hold back a little. You’ll kill this old man.

“I see. Does that work for you too, Mr. Gardinant?” Nidus asked.

“Yes...” I answered feebly. “Understood.” I really couldn’t refuse at this point. Selna was really fired up about it too.

Goddammit... How did it come to this?

Nidus, Meigen, Selna, Lucy, and me. The five of us went over to the training grounds adjacent to the adventurer’s guild.

“Hey everyone! Lysandra is apparently gonna have a match!”

“Seriously? She’s facing that old guy? Who’s he?”

“Dunno... Doesn’t look like an adventurer...”

The whole place was astir. That was understandable. It was no exaggeration to say that a black rank was the envy of all adventurers, so if one of them was having a match, everyone would be clamoring to get a chance to see it. It would’ve been far more compelling if she wasn’t facing this old man, though.

First Henbrits, then Lucy, and now Meigen... Well, Meigen doesn’t seem like a combatant himself, but still. I felt like my abilities had been tested nonstop since coming to Baltrain. Despite her looks, Lucy was actually a real big shot too. Frankly, I’d expected the capital to be a little more rational than this. Though, unlike in Beaden, I didn’t have my name to rely on when it came to vetting for my abilities—at least I understood that much.

“This is the guild’s training grounds,” Nidus said. “I believe it should provide

enough space.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Looks fine...”

“Tee hee hee! So exciting! So exciting!”

Dammit, Lucy! Quit acting like this isn't your fault! I won't get struck by lightning for punching her in the face a little, right?

After that, things proceeded without a hitch—I was all set for a match against Selna. Unlike the order's training hall, the adventurer's guild used an outside space for training. A pretty large one too. Taking a look around, there were wooden striking dummies spaced out here and there, and quite a few adventurers were milling about.

Since this was a place for training, most of the adventurers around us appeared to be young newcomers. Specifically, they mostly wore white or bronze plates. It made sense—those who'd become full-fledged adventurers didn't have to go out of their way to swing a sword at a training ground. They were probably forging their skills in the field and fulfilling actual requests.

“Hmm.”

Selna was the same as usual. She was probably used to being stared at like this. As for me, I'd spent a lot of time being stared at back at the dojo, but I still couldn't get used to having so many people watching me spar. Teaching at the Liberion Order was an extremely fresh experience for me, and this was obviously my first time being surrounded by adventurers. I was getting a little nervous.

“Well then, Master. Let's have a good match.”

“Yeah. Take it easy on me.”

Selna and I stood in the dead center of the training grounds. *Seriously, take it easy on me. I ain't kidding.* Selna offered me a clean bow. These were the manners I'd taught her at the dojo when she was a child. It made me feel all warm inside that she still remembered.

I wielded a wooden sword around the same size as a longsword, whereas Selna held a pair that were somewhat shorter and thinner. She did practice a

dual-sword style, after all. A difference in weapon had a very large influence on the way you fought.

Now then, how was I supposed to fight a dual-sword practitioner? Well, this *was* just a bout—I wasn't here to push for victory. Besides, it'd be rude to Selna if I let my thoughts wander like that.

Right! Concentrate! Concentrate!

"Here I come!"

"Guh!"

Selna signaled the start of the battle. She let out a quick roar and vanished from my sight entirely.

She crouched down? Charge, very fast, from the right. High stance, both swords? No, one's a fake. Torso blow, block it, vertical slash, dodge it, restrained kick—jump back, then chase in. Double thrust, dodge, into an open slash, block, thrust again, twisting, spinning slash, block!

"Haaaah!"

"Hngh...! Guh!"

Ooooh! She's too damn fast! Moving with lightning speed! My brain can't keep up! Her fierce onslaught didn't allow even a second to catch a breath, and I had no time to even think about counterattacking. Now wasn't the time to be worrying about what to do next anyway because it took me everything I had to dodge almost entirely on reflex. *Holy crap! Selna is crazy strong! Well, she's a black rank and all, so there's no way she could be weak!*

To put it simply, having two swords meant having double the potential moves to make. Naturally, if an amateur simply held two swords, the synchronous methodology of a dual style would be beyond them, and they wouldn't be much of a threat. Selna was different, however. Her movements made optimal use of both weapons. Sometimes delicate, sometimes bold, she whirled, performing a mad dance with both her swords.

At this rate, I wasn't going to accomplish anything. I would simply get swallowed by her unrelenting tempest of strikes. I hadn't expected an easy

victory, but I was a teacher in swordplay, so it would be a little lame to lose so handily without putting up a fight. *Wait! No! Now's not the time to worry about being lame! Whoa?! That was close! She grazed me!*

“Ha ha ha ha ha! That’s Beryl for you!”

“All that and not a single hit...? Unbelievable...”

“He dodged all that?! Who the hell is that geezer?!”

Crap, I can hear the spectators. That was proof I wasn’t concentrating hard enough.

Concentrate! Concentrate, dammit! If I lose focus for an instant, I’ll be done for!

Upward slash, vertical slash, torso blow, leg sweep, diagonal slash, sweep, kick, jumping slash, leg sweep again, spinning slash, double thrust!

The raging waves of her assault went on and on. How many seconds had passed? Things seemed so accelerated to me that I’d lost sense of time.

“Ha ha ha ha!” roared Selna. “This is so fun, Master!”

“Good for *you*! Whoa?!”

I felt the wood of Selna’s sword graze my cheek almost imperceptibly. That was really close. A few centimeters over and my head would’ve been flying backward. Selna’s expression was the textbook definition of having fun—it was like she was in a euphoric trance. The blaze in her eyes was even stronger than usual, and the corners of her mouth were very obviously curving upward.

Well, if Selna was having fun, then this match wasn’t meaningless. I wasn’t feeling that way at all, though—I was too busy dodging as if my life depended on it. She really had become ridiculously strong. It gave me a glimpse at just how much she’d dedicated herself to her craft.

“Heh... Heh heh heh... I can’t hit you! I can’t hit you at all, Master! You’re amazing!”

“Thanks for the— Gah! Praise!”

Wooden swords came sweeping in from both sides. I repelled one and

stepped toward it to dodge the other. It was practically a miracle that I was continuously dodging her attacks without taking a decisive blow. She'd grazed me multiple times. Sweat poured down my brow, creeping into the edge of my vision. I didn't even have time to blink it away. It felt like every second was being stretched to its limit. My arms were just about starting to hurt. Despite being so used to swinging a wooden sword, it felt so oddly heavy now. In all likelihood, I couldn't keep up this mysterious equilibrium for long, and I would eventually get overwhelmed. I was almost certain of it.

Still, there was one thing I'd learned from this short crossing of blades: from what I could tell, Selna was good at using both her hands, but she made oddly few moves with her left. If I had to guess, she wasn't fully ambidextrous. When I'd taught her to use a sword during her childhood, she'd been right-handed.

Obviously, her dexterity was more than enough, so she could fight without a problem. You could actually say that she'd perfected her technique already. What I'd observed could barely be called an opening—it was like a tear at the seams the size of a needle hole. But, if I was going to make a move, this was the only one I could make.

I'd exhausted my nerves to their limits warding off all attacks, and now, I waited for the blow from her left arm.

"Haaah!"

"Shah!"

Our spirited yells mixed as one. A diagonal slash from her left hand came at me. This was it. My only choice was to deliver a strike against it. I readied my wooden sword and intercepted the slash, then twirled it at the tip. This was the little trick Lieutenant Commander Henbrits had fallen for some time ago. By forcefully diverting the momentum of the strike to the side, I forced my opponent off-balance.

Selna was far too fast, so I had to focus all my nerves on matching this one strike. Naturally, such a trick wasn't enough to get the better of a master at her level. It should've been a simple matter for her to shift her center of mass to match my parry. However, that fraction of a second was all I needed.

"Guh!"

Selna's eyes shot open for a moment as she watched me make my move, but she immediately shifted her feet and regained her balance. It was impressive, but this bought me an instant. And in this single instant, I was faster than her.

"Ah!"

"That's one, I guess."

Both of Selna's swords stopped dead in the air. My wooden sword quivered right at her throat.

"Thank you...very much," she said, conceding.

"Mm. Thanks for the match."

Even if I had stopped early, this one blow had decided the match, so we brought an end to it. We both bowed to each other, then walked toward Nidus and the others.

"Ooooh! Amazing!"

"What?! What?! What the heck was that?!"

"That was wild! I just witnessed something crazy!"

All of a sudden, the already noisy training grounds were engulfed by an explosive uproar. I mean, the onlookers' shock stood to reason. Selna's rapid chain of attacks had been dreadful to behold. The highest rank of adventurer really was on a different level. I was sure this had been a good spectacle, and maybe it had even been instructional for these young adventurers.

All I'd done, though, was struggle desperately to get in a single strike. The whole time, I had simply endured, so I'd probably come out looking pretty lame.

That short exchange had left me drenched in sweat. I was exhausted. Selna was sweating too, but she didn't look tired like I did. If things had continued, I definitely would've been overwhelmed. It was probably impossible for any normal person to withstand that barrage forever.

"Phew... I wouldn't expect any less, Selna," I told her.

"No, you were wonderful, Master," she said. "I didn't think you'd fend everything off..."

We walked toward the others while exchanging our quick thoughts about the bout.

“Anyway, you still haven’t fully mastered using your left hand, right?” I asked.

“So you noticed... I suppose I still need far more training to get it to the level of my dominant hand.”

I wasn’t in a position to teach her anymore, but I didn’t mind helping her climb to even higher heights.

“Heh heh heh, giving advice to a black rank, now?” Lucy said to me, a huge smile on her face. “Aren’t you quite the big shot.”

Nidus looked surprised, but he also smiled at us. As for Meigen, he stood there with his mouth still agape.

“Now then, do you still have complaints?” Selna asked, folding her arms and glaring sharply at Meigen.

“Well? Do you?” Lucy piled on triumphantly.

Go home already, Lucy.

“No...” Meigen conceded, finally coming back to his senses. “It was a splendid display of skill. Mr. Gardinant—please forgive me for ever doubting you.” He bowed to me deeply.

“There’s no need for that,” I told him, flustered. “Your doubts were well-founded. Please raise your head.”

There was no need for him to apologize—he hadn’t harbored any actual hostility toward me. He’d simply viewed me with the perfectly natural concern that a guild administrator has for his charges. It was troublesome for some geezer to pop out of nowhere exclaiming, “I’m gonna teach your newbies!” On that point, his stance had been the correct one to take. I wasn’t quite sure how I’d gotten his approval, though. All I’d done was withstand Selna’s tempest.

“Ho ho ho, then it’s decided,” Nidus said. “Our young ones will be in your care.”

“Please leave them to me...” *Guess I can’t call it off now, huh? I really want to, though.*

“Now is as good a time as any,” Nidus added. “Let’s get you introduced to the ones you’ll be watching. Meigen, please call them over.”

“Yes, right away.”

It seemed we were going to get the meeting with the new adventurers out of the way now. Well, this was their training arena, so it wasn’t strange for them to be around. Since I was going to be accompanying them, it was best to at least know their names and faces. There were far more adventurers out there than knights, so looking for them without knowing who they were would be quite the task.

Once Meigen was out of earshot, Nidus turned to me and quietly spoke. “Sorry about him. He’s very talented, but also stubborn.”

“Aah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

To repeat myself, his apprehensions about me made sense, so it wasn’t my place to say anything about it. I honestly would’ve preferred for everyone else to be a little more worried about the heavy responsibility I was going to bear. Not that they would.

I decided to strike up a conversation to kill time. “Selna. Do all adventurers work on their own like you do?”

Now that I thought of it, I knew as little about adventurers as I did about knights. I wanted to at least learn the basics.

“No. The majority work in teams of three to six people,” she answered. “When the team gets too large, they start disagreeing about coordination and how to divide the rewards, so they generally don’t get bigger than that. I mostly work solo, but sometimes I form a team too.” Selna’s words came out smoothly, as if she were a teacher.

So it turns out that adventurers fundamentally work in groups. There was, in fact, a limit to what an individual was capable of, and having more friends was better than having fewer of them. Adventuring was a dangerous job, after all.

“Beryl, call me if you ever go on a dungeon attack of your own,” Lucy said. “I’ll help too.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s never gonna happen,” I replied, rejecting her outright.

“Why?!”

Did she really think that I, of all people, was going to get giddy about challenging a dungeon? I didn’t want to get rich quick or become famous or anything. I wanted to live a relaxing life teaching swordsmanship. *And seriously, Lucy, what are you even here for? Go home.*

“You can take the front while I cover the rear, right?” Lucy mumbled. “I think we’d make a pretty good team...”

“I won’t deny it, but my body wouldn’t be able to keep up with that.”

Just as she’d mentioned, swordsmen had horrible compatibility against wizards, but that made them all the better when working as a team. Still, us teaming up was never going to happen...

A while later, Meigen came back with three youngsters in tow.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said.

Taking a casual look at them, it was very clear they were nervous. Well, it must’ve been rare for a newcomer to get a chance to talk to a black rank so early in their career. Of course they felt tense.

“Please introduce yourselves,” Meigen told them.

“Y-Yes!” the three responded with a start.

“I-I’m Porta! A swordsman!”

“N-Needry... I also...use a sword...”

“I-I’m...Sarlikatz...”

Wow, they were really trembling. Were they going to be okay during the dungeon attack? I was getting worried already. They were a team of two men and a woman. Going by their plates, Porta and Needry were bronze, whereas Sarlikatz was silver. That said, at this level, it didn’t make much of a difference.

“I’m Beryl Gardinant. Nice to meet you.”

“Selna Lysandra. This time around, Mas— Mr. Beryl Gardinant and I will be supervising your team. Incidentally, do you have a dedicated seeker? Or is this

the whole team?”

What’s a seeker? I’ve never even heard that word.

“Ah... That’s me...” Sarlikatz said, timidly raising his hand.

“This team was originally a pair consisting of Porta and Needry,” Meigen elaborated. “They then recruited Sarlikatz.”

I was starting to get the picture. Porta and Needry looked like childhood friends. Judging by appearances, the three of them were right around the age when it was hard to tell whether they were teens or adults. Sarlikatz did look slightly older though. It was hard to tell a youngster’s age at a glance, but I’d met lots of children at the dojo, so I was pretty good at making estimates.

“Sorry, Selna. What’s a seeker?” I asked, deciding to get that question out of the way now. If I was going to be supervising, remaining ignorant about adventurers would be pretty bad.

“Seekers are responsible for tracking monsters, finding traps, and sometimes disarming the latter,” Selna explained. “Some teams go without one, but many have a dedicated seeker.”

“I see. Meaning Sarlikatz holds the keys to this team?”

Hearing this, Sarlikatz jolted and began trembling. *Sorry, I’m not threatening you! Please forgive me.*

“Then Meigen, where will this dungeon attack be taking place?” Selna asked.

“Let’s see... It’s a dungeon in the southern part of the Azlaymia Forest.”

“Ah, there. That’s ideal for newcomers.”

Selna and Meigen got things moving along now that introductions were over. As for my part, there wasn’t really a need for me to say anything, so I simply idled about listening to their conversation. Was I really necessary for this? I was pretty sure I could’ve been left out.

The Azlaymia Forest was a wooded region a little southeast of Baltrain. It contained many wild beasts and monsters, but nothing particularly large had ever been discovered there. I’d never been myself, so I wasn’t that well-informed about the region. In the grand scheme of things, it apparently wasn’t

particularly dangerous.

“Then you’ll convene at the carriage stop in the central district tomorrow morning,” Meigen continued.

“Mm, that’s fine,” Selna said. “Does that work for you, Master?”

“Yeah, that works,” I responded in a fluster as the conversation suddenly turned to me. *Whoops. Turned into a complete bystander for a moment there...*

“W-We look forward to working with you!” Porta exclaimed energetically.

“Yeah, likewise,” I told him.

They were probably still inexperienced, but they looked like good kids at heart. My thoughts suddenly drifted to the pupils I’d left behind at the dojo. I wondered how Randrid was doing. I wanted to check on him if I ever had the time, but my dad was liable to kick me right back out...

Oops, enough of that. My thoughts are drifting again. Seeing that the region we were going to wasn’t that dangerous, things would probably be fine, even with me tagging along. As the senior here, I just had to make sure that the young ones didn’t get caught up in some kind of unforeseen mess.



“H-Hello, everyone. Sorry I’m late.”

Come morning, I had my usual breakfast at the inn then headed for the carriage stop in the central district. Everyone I was meeting there—Selna, Porta, Needry, and Sarlikatz—had already arrived. That made things really awkward right from the get-go. Had it been a bad idea to follow my usual routine and eat breakfast?

“G-Good morning, Mr. Gardinant!”

“Good...m-morning...”

Porta and Needry gave me energetic and nervous greetings, respectively. Sarlikatz looked tense too, offering no more than a light bow. I made a mental note of their personalities. This old man had a lot of experience handling kids, after all.

“Then let’s get going,” Selna said. “We’ll all be riding a carriage.”

“Sure thing.”

We all climbed aboard the carriage that had been prepared for us beforehand. During my trips to and from Beaden, the Liberion Order had covered the costs. This time, the adventurer’s guild was handling it. Most dungeons were rather far away, so it wasn’t feasible to just take a casual stroll to them from town. And when it came to training excursions and handling requests, the guild largely covered travel expenses. The order and the guild definitely had deep coffers. Such fancy treatment was impossible out in Beaden.

Once everyone was aboard, Sarlikatz got the horses moving. The scenery started to slip slowly by as the carriage coasted over the paved road.

“Hmm. So an adventurer is driving the carriage himself, huh?” I remarked.

“Adventurers often travel long distances,” Selna explained. “Learning to handle a horse is a basic skill.”

“Are we taking this carriage all the way to the Azlaymia Forest?” I asked.

“Yes. We can’t take the carriage into the forest itself, so we’ll be dismounting in the vicinity and going on foot from there.”

As expected, Selna was the one to answer every question. She really did seem used to this. This probably wasn’t her first time accompanying newcomers on a training excursion. As such, an obvious question came to mind. *Why did they go out of their way to get me to come along?* Well, the question hadn’t just occurred to me—I’d been wondering that from the very beginning—but still. I honestly felt like Selna could manage watching these three with ease. Being recommended to the guild had been quite the mystery in and of itself, but even without that recommendation, was there really a need to assign *two* supervisors here? I’d been confused about this the whole time.

So, I decided to just ask outright. “By the way, is there a rule or something that specifies needing multiple supervisors for this kind of training?”

Unlike with all my other questions, Selna hesitated for a few seconds, then answered in a whisper just quiet enough that nobody else could hear her.

“Normally, the rules state that two platinum ranks—or one ocean rank or higher—must accompany.”

“Hmm.” *So I really am unnecessary?* “Can’t see why I’m needed, then...”

“Have you not heard the rumors, Master?” Selna continued quietly as the carriage clattered over the cobbled roads. “Lately, monsters have been acting strangely.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it... How are they acting strangely?” How was I supposed to know that? I mean, if that was a problem, wouldn’t dealing with it be the job of the adventurer’s guild or the order? This wasn’t the time to be dragging a boring old man into things.

“There have been eyewitness accounts of large monsters in regions where they normally shouldn’t be,” Selna continued. “The guild has dispatched investigators already, but...they still haven’t identified the cause.”

“Hmm... Well, that’s just great.”

Um, Selna? Isn’t that really bad? I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about the ecology of monsters or wild beasts, but I’d spent a good portion of my life as a villager. I knew the fundamentals. Much like humans, monsters had clearly defined spheres they lived in—you could call those areas their territory. They weren’t quite as accurately delineated as national borders, but even so, unless something significant happened, they kept to their own regions. If the monsters in one territory—a single specimen or an entire pack—were moving elsewhere, it meant something was going on in those lands. At least, those would be the normal assumptions. Yet the adventurer’s guild still didn’t know the reason. That was disconcerting, to say the least. I hoped nothing weird was going to happen on this trip.

“Given that, to account for unexpected events on training excursions like this, more personnel are being dispatched to supervise,” Selna added. “That naturally leads to a shortage of high-ranking adventurers to go along, so I thought of asking for your assistance.”

“I see... I understand now. Thanks.”

The situation made sense now, but I still didn’t get why they’d chosen *me*.

Wasn't that the kind of thing they should be coordinating with the Liberion Order and the magic corps for? The whole situation was just bringing up more questions.

"Does Allusia... Does the order know about this problem?" I asked.

If monsters were behaving strangely, the nation couldn't turn a blind eye to it either. As such, the order and the magic corps should've been informed already.

"I believe the information has been handed to them. Citrus *should* know about it..."

"Hmm..."

Well, if Allusia knew, then it wasn't a problem. The reason I hadn't been informed was probably because I wasn't counted among the forces she could deploy. At most, I was an instructor, not a frontline combatant. I didn't really want to fight either. I wanted to avoid being a burden and dragging everyone down.

As I listened to the rhythmic clattering of the wheels, the carriage left the city. Baltrain was much like a fortress with large walls surrounding it. Completely exterminating monsters to the point of extinction was essentially impossible, so it was common to fortify settlements like this against monster attacks. The walls around the capital were on a different level, though. Out in the countryside, Beaden was basically just fenced off.

Once we were beyond the walls, the scenery wasn't all that different from the road outside Beaden. The sphere of human influence was wider near Baltrain, but once outside that sphere, everywhere was much the same. The carriage proceeded from the paved roads of the capital to the well-trodden dirt roads of the country.

Even though national borders had been established, there was unexpectedly little land for humans to live safely in. Naturally, humanity tried its best, but it wasn't like every citizen was capable of fighting. Territory under one's jurisdiction was different from territory under one's control. In that sense, the adventurer's guild had jurisdiction over the Azlaymia Forest, but they certainly weren't *rulers* of that territory.

Territory under human rule became villages, then cities, then formed countries. And because settled territory was still developing all over the world, I could make a living doing what I did. It was pretty ironic.

“It really is best for the world to be at peace,” I muttered.

“To travel a world with no danger. That truly is a dream,” Selna agreed.

As we traveled to the dungeon in Azlaymia Forest, we passed our time in true tranquility.



After riding in the carriage, spending one night camping outdoors, and then a few more hours on the move the following morning, we finally arrived at the outer edge of the Azlaymia Forest. With the vast woodlands spreading out before us, we dismounted the carriage and walked another thirty minutes.

“Here we are...”

“Hmm. Looks just about right.”

A small hill rose up in front of us, and on the face of that hill was the entrance to a cave. It was a little shabby, so calling it a dungeon was somewhat generous. Still, this was just about right for training young new adventurers—other dungeons and ruins contained many vicious monsters and instant-death traps. The idea of exploring those didn’t appeal to me in the slightest...but thinking about that danger helped me understand that adventuring was a job where you truly staked your life on gaining fame.

“Yesterday was really pleasant,” I remarked casually. “You’re all so used to traveling like that.”

“I-It was nothing! Don’t mention it!” Porta responded, curling into himself.

Adventurers had to camp outside all the time. *Honestly, it sounds rough.* This was all part of the lifestyle, though—jobs were often far away, so making a day trip to a dungeon was usually out of the question. Incidentally, travel preparations were generally done by the trainees to gain experience, so Selna hadn’t participated. Nobody had said anything to me, so I hadn’t helped out either. *Now that I think about it, even if this dungeon is relatively close to town,*

going out on an expedition without field knowledge is pretty dangerous. I'm so sorry for being ignorant.

Also, if the new adventurers hadn't managed to prepare a campsite, we would've turned around on the spot and headed back to Baltrain. Apparently, those who couldn't accurately estimate the travel time or plan their supplies and stops accordingly weren't qualified to be adventurers. On that point, this team had earned a passing grade. Selna hadn't really said anything about their performance, and we'd spent a night camping without incident.

"Then... I'll get ready..."

We assembled in front of the cave. The one who raised his voice was the team's seeker, Sarlikatz. After taking a short peek inside, he placed a hand against the bracelet on his left wrist. A faint light began to shine from it, and something suddenly crossed my mind.

"Is that magic equipment, maybe?" I asked.

"Ah... Yes, it is..." he answered timidly.

At a glance, he seemed like the type who was difficult to communicate with, but I knew how to handle kids like these—it was simply a matter of not pushing them too hard or backing off too much. Acting natural around them was enough to help establish a conversation. Such was an old man's wisdom. *Not that I should really boast about that...*

"Mind explaining to me what it does?" I asked.

"Ah, yes..." Sarlikatz nodded, then stood in the middle of our group and held up his left arm a little. "Um... This shines when life-forms are nearby. There are five of us, including me, right now...but if anything else gets closer, it'll glow brighter..."

"I see... Useful for a scout, huh?"

Sarlikatz had done his best to explain, even if he'd been somewhat inarticulate. In short, his bracelet was a detector. If any life-forms—namely, humans or monsters—were nearby, it would glow brighter and brighter based on proximity. As long as he knew the base brightness for the five of us, it was possible to determine whether something else was approaching and

prepare...to a certain extent, at least.

The bracelet's light was also very faint, so it was unlikely to get us spotted—our torches in the dark would be much more noticeable. *Magical equipment sure is convenient.* It didn't seem like I would ever get the opportunity to use any, but I kind of wanted something. I was starting to understand why Ficelle was so hooked on collecting them.

"O-Okay! Let's get going!" Porta shouted in a burst of energy. "Sarlikatz! We're relying on you!"

"R-Right... I-I'm off..."

With that as our signal, the team entered the cave. Sarlikatz took the lead, followed by Porta and Needry. Selna and I were farther behind them. Thinking back, Selna hadn't spoken up since we'd entered the Azlaymia Forest. In all likelihood, she was only here as a supervisor, so she wasn't going to provide them with advice. It seemed like the three newcomers knew this because they didn't try talking to her—they had likely been told not to depend on their supervisors. *Hmm, in that case, it wasn't proper for me to strike up a conversation with Sarlikatz. Sorry. This old man will reflect on that.*

So, without any particular conversation, our group of five continued our march. The air in the cave was chilly and damp. A slight stench lingered in the air, mixed with the characteristic smell of confined places.

"There they are..." I muttered.

"Seems so," Selna whispered back. "Well, there'd be no point to this if they weren't here."

She had a point. We were here to see the fledgling team's combat skills, after all.

"What kind of monsters are we expecting?" I asked.

I was sure that the newcomers had been informed of their targets before this whole training exercise. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to put together a plan. As such, I figured it would be fine to bring up the topic.

"Mainly goblins," Selna answered. "Also, big bats and cave worms. Good

enough to see what they've got."

"I see."

These were all familiar names. Goblins were like the stereotype of all small monsters that lived in forests and caves. Each individual goblin wasn't all that strong, but they tended to swarm together. If the team didn't have an appropriate way of dealing with such numbers, they'd be forced into a hard struggle. This foe was a perfect choice for training.

Big bats and cave worms were pretty much exactly what they sounded like—unusually large bats and worms. They possessed no special abilities, and handling them was no more difficult than killing prey on a regular hunting trip. Not too long ago, I'd hunted them pretty often in Beaden, so this felt almost nostalgic.

Man, I'm glad I know how to handle these particular monsters. I couldn't be careless, though. The important thing here wasn't for me to win, but to save the youngsters if it looked like they were going to lose.

"Found them..." Sarlikatz warned from his place at the front of the team. "Deeper inside... Probably a lot!"

"G-Got it! Needry...!"

"Y-Yes!"

Porta and Needry sounded really tense. They were both armed with standard shortswords, and they drew them, bracing for battle. Sarlikatz also unsheathed the dagger at his waist.

Jarring voices echoed from deeper in the cave. *Those sounds couldn't have come from humans...* Down the gloomy passageway, the source of the noise slowly took shape. The thing was seedy and only about half the size of a child. It wasn't particularly muscular either. In a pure contest of strength, any adult could beat it. However, unlike a human, it had monstrosly green skin, canines that stretched beyond its lips, and reptilian eyes. These features would prevent anyone from treating it like a human child. This creature, the archetype of all small monsters, was a goblin.

"Master, I believe you already know this, but..." Selna whispered.

I nodded. “Mm. Let’s see what the young ones are made of.”

I understand well enough. There’s no point in me cutting the goblins down.

“There are...six!”

“Three against six...! Let’s do it, you two!”

“Y-Yes!”

The three youngsters fired themselves up and faced the monsters. Inside this remote cave, the curtains quietly rose on the practical training exercise for these fledgling adventurers.

“Hyaaaah!”

“Gah!”

The quiet cave jolted with roaring echoes. Porta swung his sword carefully so that it didn’t collide with the cavern walls and cleanly bisected a goblin.

“Hmm, a good slash.”

I voiced my observations without really thinking about it. There was a desperate battle going on in front of me, and I had to hang back and do nothing but watch. It made me restless, though watching the new team was my job, so I couldn’t fight for them. As such, I decided to focus on taking in their swordplay.

“He’s very aware that he’s fighting inside a cave, isn’t he?” Selna said.

She apparently felt the same way I did. I didn’t know what the average bronze rank was supposed to be capable of, but I felt like that Porta kid had good senses. A shortsword was a very common weapon, as was a longsword. The cutting edge determined the quality of the blade, but otherwise, they had no standout characteristics. The typical length and weight of these weapons were ideal for many fighting styles, and they could flexibly handle different types of combat situations, so they were widely used by everyone from beginners to experts. Still, every weapon had strengths and weaknesses. For longswords and shortswords—and this went for every long-edged weapon—you had to be very careful about swinging them around in a confined space. Ceilings and walls could get in the way.

“Ah...!”

“Gah... Ghk...”

Another goblin crept up to Porta from the side, but Sarlikatz’s dagger brought an end to it. In narrow corridors like this, thrusting weapons such as daggers or rapiers were far easier to wield than larger-edged weapons like shortswords, longswords, or broadswords. Naturally, a dagger lacked weight, and it was hard to defend with. In that sense, Sarlikatz understood the properties of his weapon well. He avoided head-on confrontation and chose only to take advantage of openings from the side.

“H-Hyaah?!”

“Gah! Gyah!”

Oops, speak of the devil. Perhaps panicking, Needry had swung her shortsword in a long arc, bouncing it off the cavern’s wall. Seeing this as a good opportunity, a goblin readied its cudgel to strike. I doubted that one hit from its weapon would be lethal, but... *Am I supposed to make a move here?*

“Needry!” shouted Porta. “Sarlikatz, please!”

“Mm!”

Oh, maybe I don’t need to do anything...? Having finished his second goblin, Porta had quickly noticed Needry’s crisis and he’d called to Sarlikatz for aid. To describe the situation broadly, Porta and Needry were fighting goblins at the front while Sarlikatz darted between them to offer support as needed. There were three goblins left. Porta was fighting one, while Needry was fighting another. The last goblin observed the situation for a moment and then moved to join the battle against Needry. This was where Sarlikatz had to put in some effort, since he was the nimblest. I kind of felt like a father watching his children grow.

“Take this...!”

“Gyah?!”

One of the goblins raised its weapon to swing at Needry. Perhaps judging that his dagger wasn’t enough to stop the goblin from swinging, Sarlikatz shoulder-tackled it. The sudden blow from behind sent the creature rolling across the ground, its cudgel still held high.

“N-Needry...!”

“Y-Yes...!”

Using that opening, Needry immediately landed a finishing blow on the fallen goblin. Now there were only two left. Goblins were inferior to humans in terms of simple strength, so having lost the advantage of numbers, the youngsters’ victory was certain. *As long as they don’t get too conceited or careless, that is. Though honestly, they don’t look like the kind of team to make that sort of mistake.*

“Looks like the battle’s over. How’d they seem to you, Selna?” I asked.

“A good performance for bronzes. Porta in particular looks promising.”

“Yeah. I think he moves well too.”

We exchanged opinions as we watched the three of them clean up the last two goblins. Having messed up earlier, Needry was now properly focused and energetically hacking a goblin up. *Yup, it’s good to be enthusiastic.*

“A-All done...cleaning up...”

Even if the fight hadn’t been easy for them, the three had defeated six goblins without any real injuries. Fulfilling his role as the seeker, Sarlikatz made sure all the goblins were dead, then announced the end of the battle. Yet, this was only the first encounter of their training program—the mission was to clean out the *entire* dungeon. Well, this was less a dungeon and more a regular old cave, but it was the thought that counted.

We started walking again. A question had been nagging at me for a while, so I decided to ask it.

“Hey, Selna, is this place used often?”

It would be one thing if this dungeon was a historic ruin with some magical effect, but no matter how I looked at it, this was just a normal cave. And if it had been used in the past to train adventurers, the monsters should’ve already been exterminated. That wasn’t the case, so had they sent beginners to an unexplored cave?

“Because of the environment, small monsters will start inhabiting the cave

again, even after they're wiped out," Selna explained. "There are other places like this nearby. We use each in turn at fixed intervals to train newcomers."

"I see..."

It made sense. To put it nicely, the Azlaymia Forest and other small dungeons were being used as training areas. Despite knowing the number and types of monsters in these places, the guild still needed jurisdiction if they were to be used over and over. It was something I never would've realized while living out in the sticks of Beaden. Swinging a sword in a training hall wasn't going to give anyone practical experience, but they couldn't place chicklets who didn't know the ABCs of adventuring out on the front lines. That would only needlessly increase the number of fatalities. So, the answer they'd come up with was this: send supervised newcomers to areas where small monsters could easily nest. *This level of ingenuity sure suits the adventurer's guild.*

After the initial battle, the team proceeded through the cave, clearing out all the monsters. In total, they cleaned up twelve goblins, four big bats, and two cave worms. They eventually reached the back of the cave, which marked the safe ending of their training excursion.

"Now then, I guess all that's left is to head back," I said. "Good thing we didn't have to jump in."

"Indeed..." Selna agreed. "That's worth celebrating."

While I didn't expect that I would lose to a mere goblin, fighting while protecting someone else was really nerve-wracking. It was a sensation that could never be simulated in a mock battle, and one I never wanted to experience...if possible.

When I turned to Selna once more, I noticed that she seemed deep in thought. *Actually, now that I think back, she's been like that for a while.* She wasn't exactly distracted, but I could tell that her attention was split.

"Selna? What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's just...there were clearly too few of them."

"What do you mean?"

“This place hasn’t been used for a while,” she murmured, carefully picking her words. “There weren’t many goblins in the cave, and we weren’t attacked even *once* after entering the Azlaymia Forest... Normally, there should’ve been more monsters and wild beasts and such.”

“Hmm...”

She did have a point. In a forest of this size—and a cave that nestled perfectly within said forest—it seemed like there should be a few more monsters than this. Well, I didn’t know why they were absent, so there was no point in thinking about it. I could only conclude that there just happened to be fewer monsters this time around.

“Ms. Lysandra! Mr. Gardinant! The exit!”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. We’ll be right there.”

Perhaps excited by safely finishing the training exercise, Porta energetically pointed to the cave’s exit. As we approached the outdoors, a refreshing wind brushed against my cheek. It felt great after having spent so long in this damp cave. Porta scrambled to be the first one out, then casually stretched his arms. It was still the middle of the day, so I figured we could take a nice relaxing walk back to—

Hang on... Why’s it so dark outside? My internal clock was telling me that it was too early for the sun to set. And the weather was clear, so even with all the trees in the forest, it was far too dim. The wind was slightly irregular too. My five senses were telling me that something was faintly out of place.

There! Something’s above us!

“Porta!” I yelled. “Get down!” I started running toward him.

Surprised by my voice, Selna turned to me. I didn’t know why, but a large shadow had fallen over the cave’s gloomy entrance.

Suddenly, Porta was sent flying by *something* out there. He vanished from my sight in an instant.

“Porta!” I shouted again.

The creature I’d caught a fleeting glimpse of couldn’t possibly have been

called a “small monster.” Its speed was no joke either. I prayed that Porta wasn’t dead.

“You guys stay in the cave!” Selna ordered Needry and Sarlikatz. Having witnessed the same thing I had, she sprinted by my side.

The entrance was right there. We would be outside in a second. The two remaining youngsters looked like they had no idea what was going on—one was shocked and the other simply dumbfounded. *I didn’t expect this either, just so you know!* Well, asking new adventurers to react appropriately to an extreme irregularity was a bit unreasonable.

Normally, Sarlikatz should’ve been paying attention to any irregular readings from his bracelet, even after the mission was over. But, after reaching the end of the cave, he’d probably dropped his guard. That was understandable. He might have been older than Porta and Needry, but he was still just a silver rank. It would’ve been stranger for him to have predicted and prepared for a situation like this.

“Gh!”

Leaping out into the lush greenery, I found a single large monster waiting for me. It had powerful limbs and magnificent wings—including its tail, it was five or six meters long. With those features, only one monster came to mind.

“Griffon!”

I yelled the name without thinking. A griffon was classified as a large flying monster. It didn’t possess any special abilities, but it had might and agility paired with powerful limbs and a sturdy beak. Those alone were more than enough of a threat to humans.

Apparently, they largely inhabited mountainous regions—I’d never heard of one appearing deep inside a forest like this. Besides, griffons were supposed to have white fur, but this one was a deep crimson color. Perhaps it was a little rude to mention, but the griffon reminded me of Selna’s fiery hair. I’d never heard of one looking like this, let alone seen anything like it.

“Graaaaaah!”

The red griffon opened its mouth wide and howled. It’d perceived a new

threat...or perhaps new prey. In the next instant, wind enveloped the griffon's body and whirled around it.

"Whoa?!"

I dealt with the sudden charge reflexively, meeting the griffon's incoming beak with my sword and using my wrist to twist my body away from the impact. *Crap, that was close! This thing is damn fast for its size!* I wouldn't have been able to block that had my sword still been sheathed. Getting hit would've sent me flying away, so I'd had no choice but to parry the blow with the tip of my blade.

My hands were numb with pain after only one ramming attack. Even if I continued to endure its onslaught, there was no telling how long my body and weapon would hold out.

"Right, Porta...!"

Having dodged the griffon's attack, I took a quick look around. Porta, who'd been blown around ten meters away, was limp against a tree. I saw that he was stirring ever so slightly. *Good. Looks like he isn't dead. But if we leave him alone, I'm not sure if he'll stay alive.*

"Master!" yelled Selna. "That's no normal griffin! It's a named monster! Zeno Grable!"

"A named monster?!" I hollered back, keeping my eyes on the griffon.

Seriously? I'm pretty sure that puts it way beyond my skills. I'd heard rumors of these types of monsters before. Normally, monsters were just called whatever their species name was—goblins were all goblins, and griffons were all griffons. However, maybe because of a mutation or something, sometimes a specimen appeared that was far beyond the species norm. In general, they were all stronger and bigger than the others, which is why they were treated so specially and often given a name. Organizations like knightly orders or the adventurer's guild would decide on the names, calling attention to the danger they posed and endorsing the elimination of the beast.

In short, the monster before my eyes was seriously big game. *Goddammit, I really wanna go home now...*

“Grrr...!”

The red griffon—Zeno Grable—growled menacingly. Failing to finish me off with that ramming attack had apparently infuriated it. *Don’t be so angry. Tiny humans like me train all our lives to put up a fight against big guys like you.* Though, something *this* big was a bit beyond my expectations.

“So this is why there are so few small monsters around!” Selna spat, readying her dual blades.

Running away would be seriously difficult at this point. It was plain to see that Zeno Grable had more mobility than we did, and we would now need to transport the heavily wounded Porta, which would slow us down further. *Under these circumstances, I doubt we can get away.*

That said, this also didn’t seem like an opponent we could bring down quickly. Judging by its size, it wasn’t going to collapse after a few cuts—we’d need to hack away at it quite a lot. Even at a glance, its fur and limbs looked sturdy. Would a regular blade even draw blood?

We didn’t have time to waste. At this rate, Porta was going to die. We couldn’t rely on Needry and Sarlikatz here since they were beginners, so Selna and I would need to take this thing out.

A strange silence enveloped the area. Keeping my sword at the ready, I called out to Selna. “You got any potions?”

Someone had to stall Zeno Grable and buy time for us to retrieve and treat Porta—that role would naturally fall to me or Selna. Once he was safe, we could all make a decision on whether to fight or run away. *This is probably the best plan we’ve got.*

“I do,” Selna replied. “Two—magically made.”

Good. That’s a black rank for you. She had brought along the most effective potions available. Unless things got really bad, they would be enough to keep Porta alive.

I kept my eyes on Zeno Grable—I was positive it would attack the moment I looked away. Considering our abilities, it made the most sense for her to buy us some time while I retrieved Porta.

I held my palm out to Selna. “Got it. Then, please...”

“Ah! Understood! It’s in your hands!”

I knew she would catch my meaning. I didn’t even have to ask for the potion.
Something quickly struck my left hand, a delightful *clap* resounding through the Azlaymia Forest.

Hm? What? A high five?! Where’s the potion?!

“I’ll save Porta! Master, keep Zeno Grable’s attention!”

W-Wroooooong! Not that! The other way around! You’ve got it backward!
Who the hell asked to be tagged in?! This is a complete breakdown in communication!

“Graaaaah!”

For some reason, Zeno Grable didn’t give Selna so much as a glance as she broke into a run toward Porta. It focused solely on me, deciding *I* was its main target, and poised itself to charge once more.

“Goddammit!”

Right before my eyes, Zeno Grabel’s enormous body closed in on me.

Head-on charge. Right claw high. Fast. And probably heavy. If I close in, I’ll be crushed by the mass. Parry it to the side. Riposte with an upward slash. Good hit, but...I can feel how hard the hide is through my longsword.

“Grah!”

“Man! It really is tough!”

Despite getting in a good strike, my blow felt completely ineffective. It hadn’t bounced off, but it also hadn’t dealt more than surface damage. At this point, I had three options: use a sharper and heavier sword to chop into its flesh, step back and then put all my might into a charging blow, or aim for what I could only guess were its vitals. This was going to be rough any way you sliced it.

“This is a bit too much for an old man!”

One minute—that was my low estimate for the amount of time it would take Selna to rescue Porta and give him emergency treatment. If Selna had been

anyone else, I would've guessed two or three minutes. So, during this minute, I had to fight Zeno Grable all on my own.

“Graaaaah!”

Having failed to take down its prey in one strike, let alone two, Zeno Grable roared in irritation and anger, readying itself to attack again. I couldn't even begin to guess how many blows I'd have to land to bring it down. Unfortunately, just one of its strikes would spell the end for me. It was quite the tightrope act.

“Hmph!”

I jumped back to dodge claws sweeping in from the side, slashing its foreleg in the process. This still barely scratched the griffon. It seemed like its limbs were sturdier than its body. *Guess lopping off a leg to take away its fighting capacity isn't an option...*

“Now then, the conventional weak point has to be the face!”

Backing off a little, I analyzed the situation. I was still only a few meters away from Zeno Grable, and the beast could close that distance in an instant. *The face is definitely my best bet, especially its mouth or eyes.* Judging by my previous slashes, the other parts of its body would be too tough. I figured the wings were a good option too, but my opponent was honestly too large, so its wings were often out of my reach.

“Porta! Get it together!”

I glanced over for an instant and saw that Selna had reached Porta's side. She pulled a potion from her pocket and poured it liberally all over him. Things were looking rough. Even if Selna was able to return to the fight, escaping while carrying Porta and guiding the other two newbies was probably out of the question. In that case, our only option for survival was to finish Zeno Grable right here...or at the very least, render it incapable of fighting.

Goddammit! Why did it come to this? I would've liked to run back to the capital, bawling my eyes out all the way, but I wasn't allowed to. The lives of the three young adventurers behind me were at stake—I would be a disgrace to all swordsmen if I abandoned them to save myself. I was just an average old man,

but I wasn't so cowardly that I would throw away my pride as a swordsman out of concern for my own safety. I couldn't afford to lose face to my former pupil either.

"Then there's no choice but to *do it!*"

I fired myself up and lunged toward Zeno Grable.

"Graaaah!"

"Hmph!"

It tried to intercept me with a claw, which I dodged and warded off using my sword. I wouldn't win in a straightforward contest of strength—the muscle mass disparity between a human and a monster like this was just too great. As such, I needed to use my sword to manipulate its strength, turn its attacks, and then counterattack while dodging out of the way. Even the very normal act of defending myself was completely off the rails here.

"If only this was just a bout! I could stop after scoring a point!"

After dodging Zeno Grable's attack, I slashed at its flank. I had to do this while moving my legs, so I couldn't put my full weight behind it. I couldn't expect to deal much damage, but the slice was enough to attract its attention—to the griffin, I was like an annoying fly zipping around.

If I could keep this up, then Selna would eventually join me to defeat it. However, until she finished treating Porta, my main priority was to keep Zeno Grable's focus on me. I had to stave off the onslaught.

"Grrrr!"

Zeno Grable didn't look like it had suffered any damage. I'd sliced it numerous times, but not even a drop of blood was visible. *That's a pretty rough outcome for a swordsman...*

"Grrr!"

"Shah!"

Incoming charge. Dodge it. Incoming claw. Dodge it too. Incoming, dodge, incoming, dodge, incoming, dodge, slash, doesn't work, incoming again, dodge.

Hmm, even if this thing had been given a name, it was still fundamentally a griffon. Its main attacks were charging and striking with its claws or beak. The speed and strength with which it struck were nothing to scoff at, but it wasn't doing anything extraordinary. At this rate, maybe it was possible for me to hang on until Selna joined in.

Still, after this repetition of parrying and counterattacking, my hands were numb with pain; my arms were tired, and my back was bothering me. *Getting old really sucks.* Regardless, I couldn't be careless around this opponent. Yes, it was big, fast, and had strangely colored fur...but that wasn't enough for it to earn a name. *Something else must be going on here.*

Still, eating a single attack would spell the end for me, so I had to concentrate. This thing had really tough skin too. It didn't feel like I was going to win at all.

"Graoooooh!"

"Oh?"

Having properly deemed me to be an annoying fly, Zeno Grable roared in irritation. Now that my ears were attuned to the sound, something suddenly caught my eye. Zeno Grable's tail had entered the edge of vision, whipping about restlessly. *If I try hard enough, can I cut that off?* A faint hope sprouted within me. *Maybe I'll be able to deal with this abnormally large monster after all.*

"Graaaah!"

"Whoa!"

Oops, I don't have time to get lost in thought. Changing its stance, Zeno Grable came charging again.

"Shah!"

It rushed in head-first, which gave me the opportunity to slice its face. I thought I might be able to cut it up, but that didn't work out—even when I matched my slash to its charge, it was too fast for me, and I couldn't line up my sword tip properly. Well, it wasn't impossible, but if I did try, the monster and I would collide directly. In other words, I'd be sent flying.

It would be difficult to deal an effective blow unless I somehow stopped its movements for a moment. Not that I had ulterior motives or anything...but I needed to flex my skills a little bit.

“Take this!”

Dodging a ramming attack, I swung my longsword. I slipped behind Zeno Grable and spun, using the centrifugal force to deliver a slash. It was all based on guesswork, but given the distance and timing, I was pretty sure I had it right. *Get hit already, you son of a bitch!*

“Graaaaah?!”

“A solid strike!”

I felt my blade dig through Zeno Grable’s long tail. Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough to cut the appendage clean off, but the wound wasn’t shallow either. Blood dribbled to the ground from the gash.

“Graaaaah!”

Zeno Grable roared louder than ever before. *Looks like it snapped.* Most wild beasts and monsters tended to go berserk when they were injured, so if victory looked possible, it was best to slay a monster in one blow. And if you couldn’t...run away at full speed. If you tried to kill a strong monster with multiple smaller strikes, it was very common to suffer a harsh counterattack.

“Gaaaah!”

“Whoa!”

Immediately after roaring in anger, Zeno Gable unleashed a ball of fire from its enormous mouth.

Thought so! I figured it still had some kinda trick! After all, it was specially classified as a named monster, so it made sense that the beast had a hidden ace—my instincts had been right on the money. And precisely because I’d kept the possibility of a wild card in the corner of my mind, I managed to dodge the sudden, long-distance assault. Also, because I’d fought against Lucy’s magic, my mind had drifted to the possibility of such an attack. Experience really was vital. Though I didn’t feel inclined to thank Lucy for that...

“Graaaaah!”

As I dodged the fireball, Zeno Grable roared again. It didn’t seem ready to charge, which had me curious.

“Hrm?!”

Suddenly, a crack opened across the surface of the ground in Azlaymia Forest. The soil melted, and the source of incandescence gradually rose from beneath the surface.

“Hang on...! Dammit!”

What the hell?! What the hell is this?! Another trick?! Nobody told me about that! Even as I panicked, the ground around Zeno Grable was gradually crumbling. I didn’t know how far this attack reached, but at the very least, everything in the vicinity of the cave entrance was probably toast. It was way too close.

What do I do? Zeno Grable wasn’t moving. It turned out that launching such a huge attack hampered its mobility, so that was a lifesaver. Regardless, this was pretty bad. If I just stood here, the ground would eventually engulf and kill me; if I ran away, Needry and Sarlikatz might survive, but Porta definitely wouldn’t make it. Or...maybe not even that? The ground around the cave was already showing signs of change, so the circumstances were dicey for everyone. There was no time for hesitation. When I glanced to the side, I didn’t see Selna anywhere. I couldn’t see Porta either, so I hoped she’d finished rescuing him.

“Graaaaaaaah!”

“Don’t suppose you can just stop? No? Goddammit!”

Zeno Grable roared again. I really didn’t have any time. *Time to steel myself.* Running away was out of the question—if it had ever been a choice, I would’ve done so from the very beginning. *Though it was useless to keep agonizing over whether to defeat it or run away.* I had to take action, one way or another. The ground under my feet was shaking, and it wouldn’t be long before it collapsed beneath me.

“Gh!”

My enemy was right in front of me, its mouth wide open. It had also stopped moving. If I was going to approach, now was the time.

“Shaaah!”

Sometimes, thought got in the way when speed was a priority. So, I tossed aside all considerations of evading and charged right at Zeno Grable. I held my longsword straight forward and stabbed it into the griffon’s gaping mouth of hell.

“Just die already, you son of a bitch!”

“Gaaaaaah!”

I felt my sword pierce something soft...but it still wasn’t enough. I hadn’t managed to deal a finishing blow. At this rate, I had to follow up with every last ounce of strength to unleash a flurry of—

“H-Huh?”

Defying my will, my arms didn’t so much as budge. *I-I can’t pull my sword out?! Crap! Crap! What do I do?! The ground’s not collapsing anymore, but this is really bad!*

“Grrr... Gaaaah...!”

“Oh shit!”

Taking advantage of my confusion, Zeno Grable acted before I could. Its forelimb was as thick as my torso, and it was raised high, high into the air. Luckily, the beast was moving far more sluggishly than before. I hadn’t been able to kill it, but I’d dealt major damage. However, no matter how slow it moved, it possessed enough weight to crush me outright.

“Dammit! I can’t get it out!”

My longsword remained stuck, unflinching, as I panicked to yank it out. I tried forcing it up or down instead of pulling straight back, but I couldn’t feel it shift even a single millimeter. Zeno Grable was probably tensing its muscles to keep the blade in place.

“Ah...”

With its right foreleg held as high as it could go, Zeno Grable brought its limb crashing down. I could do nothing but stare in a daze—it was like the griffon was trying to crush a pesky bug. *Welp, I'm dead.*

“You sure have made a mess, you bastard.”

In the next instant, a whispering yet clear voice resounded through the air. Clad in an absolutely chilling bloodlust, with a blaze in her eyes, the Twin Dragonblade joined the fray.

“Graaaaaaaah!”

Stuck where I was, I saw her enter my field of vision—a black rank, the strongest of adventurers, my counterpart on this training excursion.

“Selna!”

Selna Lysandra leaped down from directly above Zeno Grable and plunged her two swords into its eyes.



I had no idea how she'd climbed above it, but as she plummeted down, her blades found their targets, slicing deep into the sockets. Immediately, I felt the sensation in my hands change, and it seemed I could pull out my longsword.

"G-Grrr... Gah...!"

"How tenacious!"

Even with one sword in its mouth and two more in its eyes, Zeno Grable was still alive. *I'd better pull my blade free and deliver the killing blow.*

"Hyaaaah!"

However, before I could take action, Selna twisted her body, her broadswords still in Zeno Grable's eyes, and used the centrifugal force to slash horizontally through its head. Vibrations shuddered through the hilt of my sword—I could feel that she'd torn through flesh, bone, and all sorts of other things.

Her strength and technique were impressive. *Black ranks really are on a different level...* If my sword placement had been identical to hers, I doubt I could've so skillfully put my weight and strength behind a follow-up attack. Once more, I was made keenly aware of how strong Selna was. *Honestly, had I really been necessary in this fight at all?*

"Phew..."

The impact of Selna's strike allowed my longsword to be tugged free. Still grasping the hilt, I unintentionally sat down and let out a huge sigh. I was sweating like crazy. *If Selna's attack had come a second later, I would probably be dead right now.* This had been my first serious brush with death in quite a long time.

I took another look at Zeno Grable. Swords had been driven deep into both its eye sockets, and then those same blades had torn through its skull. Even a named monster couldn't evade death after all that. Incidentally, the ground around us was also a mess. Because we'd forcefully stopped the collapse midway, the earth had caved here and there in random spots around us.

Selna sheathed her two swords. "I managed to easily climb above it because you bought time for us, Master. Thank you very much."

“No, no, there’s no need to thank me. I couldn’t defeat it.”

Honestly, I should be the one thanking her. Things had gone smoothly until I’d jammed my sword into its mouth...but I’d seriously been close to death.

“Hm...?”

Just as I tried to return my sword to its sheath, I realized that the weight in my hand seemed strangely light. The balance was off.

“Aaah...”

It’d snapped—clean in two. My longsword was missing everything from halfway down the blade to the tip. That did make sense. It’d broken off inside Zeno Grable, which was why the sensation had changed and I’d been able to pull it out.

“F-Forgive me, Master!” Selna cried. “It likely got caught in my attack!”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. You don’t need to apologize. You did what was best at the time.”

My sword had probably yielded to the force of Selna’s broadswords. My blade wasn’t badly made, but it wasn’t some masterwork or anything either—just your average longsword. On the other hand, Selna’s weapons were clearly *very* sharp. With the strength she’d put behind them, it wasn’t odd that mine had given in.

“Don’t worry about my sword,” I told Selna. “More importantly, how’s Porta doing?”

I turned my gaze toward the cave, away from the sopping mess that was Zeno Grable’s face. Needry and Sarlikatz were staring at us in shock. Farther inside, I saw Porta lying on the ground.

“He’s not in mortal danger,” Selna answered. “All that’s left is to get him back and stabilize him. He should recover.”

“That’s great. Couldn’t ask for more.”

Being an adventurer always came with risks, and the ideal outcome was to get home alive. At least, that was what I believed, though I wasn’t actually an adventurer. Still, nobody would trade their life for prestige. Facing unheard-of

dangers, treading unknown lands, and then coming back alive—that was the important part. In that sense, this excursion had been a bit of a calamity for the three newcomers, but it had also been a stroke of good luck.

“Anyway, I guess we’re saved. Thanks, Selna.”

Seriously, I was glad that Selna was with us. I couldn’t have won on my own. To put it bluntly, I’d definitely be dead. And if I’d lost, the three others would’ve been killed too. Those youngsters had bright futures ahead of them, and I felt that simply protecting them was enough to earn a gold star.

“Don’t mention it,” Selna said. Her unyielding spirit blazed behind her eyes as she squeezed out her next words. “More importantly, your sword...”

“Forget that already,” I told her. “This is my sword’s grave. Just leave it at that.”

For some reason, that was really weighing heavily on Selna’s mind. But she didn’t have to worry so much. I’d be lying if I said I had no emotional attachment to the thing...but it really wasn’t special in any way.

“M-Mr. Gardinant! Ms. Lysandra!”

Judging that the danger had passed, Needry came running out of the cave toward us. Sarlikatz hefted Porta up and also started moving toward us. *He can’t walk on his own, so we can’t just leave him behind.*

“Needry. Glad to see you’re all okay,” I said.

“Y-Yes! U-Um, thank you...very much!” she responded, still unable to stop herself from trembling.

“Ha ha ha,” I chuckled. “You’re welcome.”

I hadn’t protected them because I wanted their thanks or anything, but the appreciation felt pretty good. Though, Selna had frankly been the one to give it her all, not me. Regardless, it wasn’t good for them to remain so tense. There was no telling when the ground beneath us was going to finish collapsing, and they were surely mentally fatigued. We had to get back to Baltrain quickly.

“Now then, shall we get going?” I asked. “Selna?”

Just as I was about to suggest leaving the Azlaymia Forest, Selna started

picking through Zeno Grable's corpse.

"It's a named monster, so we have to bring back proof that identifies it," she explained. "Fur...and a claw should do."

"I see."

Now that she mentioned it, that made sense. The adventurer's guild had gone out of its way to designate Zeno Grable as a special target. They couldn't just accept a verbal testimony that the monster had been slain.

"Hmph!"

With a quick exhalation, Selna took a swing at the base of one of Zeno Grable's claws. After a loud crack, the claw fell to the ground, sliced from the root of what was probably a finger.

"It's quite hard..." Selna commented. "Seems like it'll serve well as a raw material."

"Hmm, is that so?"

I'd only heard rumors of this, but some adventurers apparently used materials from the monsters they'd slain to make their own weapons. I had pretty much nothing to do with that sort of lifestyle, so my sword had been made of regular old minerals. That same sword had just perished, though. *Hmm, not having a sword at my waist makes me feel restless. I'll have to buy a new one once I get back to Baltrain. Maybe I can swing by that blacksmith Allusia brought me to or something.*

"It might be a good idea to use Zeno Grable's claw to make you a new sword, Master," Selna suggested.

"No, no, that's yours," I said, refusing politely. "I'll pass."

I hadn't been the one to defeat it. Besides, I felt like an absurd weapon would be produced that way, so I declined. I was fine with a plain old sword. How did you make a sword from a claw, anyway? Turning it into a spear would make far more sense.

"Is that so...?" Selna muttered. "Then, shall we return? Master, when we get back to Baltrain, we'll have to report that the named monster has been slain, so

may I ask you to accompany me for that?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

Either way, we needed to report that the newbies had finished their training. It didn’t seem like that was going to take much time.

“Hee hee, it’s your triumphant return!” Selna said. “I feel proud about it too.”

“Cut that out. You’re the one who defeated it.”

The griffon’s open mouth, my reckless sword thrust... The significant damage I’d dealt had been due to sheer luck. However, there was no mistaking that Selna had delivered the decisive blow. *It probably would’ve gone smoother if I’d gone to save Porta while Selna fought Zeno Grable.* We’d defeated it in the end though, so I suppose it didn’t really matter now. Nobody had died, and I couldn’t ask for anything more. It *had* been close though... One careless step would’ve been the end of me.

“Okay then, shall we go back to Baltrain?” I asked.

“Yes!”

And just like that, following a stormy, harrowing ride, the curtains came down on the new adventurers’ practical training.



We proceeded back down the path we’d used to get to the dungeon and exited the Azlaymia Forest. Luckily, our carriage was right where we’d left it. We traveled for a while, set up camp for the night, and after a few more hours in the carriage the following day, the walls of Baltrain were in sight.

“Ms. Lysandra, Mr. Gardinant, thank you so very much!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. We just did our job.”

Porta was thanking me for the umpteenth time. He’d awoken when we’d set up camp last night, and after hearing the details from Needry and Sarlikatz, he’d bowed to me and Selna over and over. A day had passed since the incident with Zeno Grable, and he’d recovered somewhat—he was able to walk around at least. I was extremely relieved that he had no lasting injuries. Perhaps his wounds *had* actually been major, but they’d been minimized by Selna’s use of

the potion.

Porta was, of course, still developing his swordplay skills—he was the type to direct his straightforward attitude right into his blade. In that sense, I had a feeling he would become an excellent swordsman in the future. Just how much potential was sleeping within him? We would have to wait and see.

“First, make sure to take your time recuperating and healing up,” I instructed.

“I will!” Porta exclaimed. “Nothing good comes from being reckless.”

“That’s the spirit. Now get some rest.”

Porta also scored high for being so honest. In general, much like he’d said, nothing good ever came from being reckless. It was best to be in perfect physical and mental condition before surging toward your goals. Many adventurers were hotblooded types who aspired to get rich quick. These kinds of people were likely to forget themselves and dive straight into danger. While I considered this trait a touch foolhardy, from a different perspective, you could say that those without such mettle weren’t suited to making a living as adventurers. Greed, confidence, danger—those who balanced these three elements survived and grew. Dying meant losing everything.

“We’ve arrived in Baltrain,” Selna announced from the driver’s seat. She’d insisted on taking Needry and Sarlikatz’s place there for the return trip. “We have to report to the guild, so we’ll be going straight there. Are you fine with that, Master?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

By all rights, having a black rank as their personal driver was outrageous for our youngsters, but Selna was an adventurer capable of such consideration. I’d had a lot of opportunities to witness her unyielding spirit lately, but she was truly a kind person at heart who couldn’t help but act like a guardian. *Well, she was like that in the past too.*

“What is it, Master?”

“Aah, nothing.”

Oops, I’d ended up staring at Selna without thinking. Though, she really had

grown up splendidly. I'd only spent a short time looking after her during her childhood, but seeing all her progress still made me feel warm inside.

We got off at the usual carriage stop and walked to the adventurer's guild. Sarlikatz lent Porta a shoulder. I wanted Porta to go and get some rest already, but he had to report to the guild first—he just needed to hang in there a little longer.

We went through the door and proceeded straight to the counter. Selna spoke as our representative and got things moving.

"The guildmaster, please."

"Y-Yes. Right away."

When the receptionist looked at Porta, she seemed to realize that this was no trivial matter. *It's impressive that she's not overly flustered about it though. Maybe this is a common occurrence in the guild.*

A short while later, the white-haired guildmaster, Nidus, came downstairs—he was accompanied by Meigen. They both took a single look at Porta and more or less surmised the situation. Much like when I'd first met him, I got the impression that Nidus had nerves of steel. *You do gain wisdom with age, but his composure is probably also fortified by his past as an adventurer.*

"Thank you for waiting..." said Nidus. "I suppose something happened?"

"The training itself went smoothly," Selna explained. "However, afterward, we encountered the named monster Zeno Grable in the Azlaymia Forest. We're here to report its elimination."

"Unbelievable...!"

The entire lobby of the adventurer's guild erupted in shock. Until now, I'd never really considered how much of a threat monsters actually were. While I'd known that named monsters existed, they'd had nothing to do with me until recently, so I'd never had the chance to hear the gory details.

"We brought back evidence, just so you know," Selna added, placing Zeno Grable's fur and claw on the counter with a *thunk*.

"Hmm... Seems like it's true."

Before I knew it, we were surrounded by the eyes of rubbernecking adventurers who gawked at our team from across the room.

“Did you do this alone, Lysandra?” Meigen asked.

“No. I worked alongside Mast— Mr. Gardinant. All I did was deliver the final blow.”

Please don't casually exaggerate what happened.

“I see...” Nidus turned to me and bowed deeply. “Mr. Gardinant, thank you very much.”

“I-It's fine. There's no need for all that.”

I really wanted them to cut this out. I mean, it was true we'd defeated it, but Selna had done all the heavy lifting. Running around as a distraction and being a pest to Zeno Grable had taken everything out of me—I hadn't even dealt any real damage. All this praise made me itchy.

“It must have been rough for you three too,” Nidus said to the newbie adventurers behind me. “I'm glad you all made it back alive.”

As the guildmaster, he was probably the highest-ranking individual here. Normally, it would be unthinkable for a bigwig like him to show such consideration for mere bronze ranks. *Nidus is a good person with a compassionate heart—this proves it.*

Nidus turned back to Selna. “We'll put together a collection team immediately and send them out to retrieve Zeno Grable's body.”

Selna nodded. “Please do. Normally, I would've stayed behind...but because the newcomers and Mr. Gardinant were with me, I prioritized returning.”

“A wise decision. Just let me know the monster's location and leave the rest to the guild.”

Nidus and Selna got things moving on their own. *Seems they're going to retrieve Zeno Grable's corpse. Well, Selna did mention something about materials or some such, so they're probably going to use every piece of the corpse they can.*

“A named monster has been defeated, so the news must be spread in a grand

manner,” Selna said.

“Indeed. Let’s hurry with those arrangements too.” Nidus’s muttered response seemed strangely cheerful.

They were going to announce it to the public? Was a named monster *that* big a deal?

I decided to cut in. “Um, this might sound abrupt, but...”

“What is it, Mr. Gardinant?” Nidus asked.

I figured I should ask a little more about named monsters while we were on the topic. After all, I’d battled and defeated one without even knowing the basics.

“I’ve heard about named monsters before...but I’m fairly ignorant, so I don’t know much about them.”

Nidus chuckled. “Ha ha ha ha, is that so?”

My lack of knowledge *was* a little embarrassing, but I couldn’t really say anything if they made fun of me for it. There was that famous saying: “To ask may be but a moment’s shame; not to ask and remain ignorant is a lifelong shame.” I didn’t really know if that applied to this situation, though.

“Meigen, explain.”

“Yes, sir.”

Oh, the guildmaster’s tagging out? Anyway, is it okay for the likes of me to be taking this much time away from the guild’s two leaders? I suppose it’s a little late to ask.

“We of the adventurer’s guild take a leading role in identifying unique specimens and giving them names,” explained Meigen. “Currently, there are forty named monsters confirmed within the Liberis Kingdom. Zeno Grable was one of them.”

“Forty, huh?” That doesn’t sound like a lot to me. So we brought down one of those? Well, ain’t that amazing.

“Naturally, the number fluctuates when monsters are successfully eliminated

or as new variants are discovered...but fundamentally, any requests involving named monsters cannot be accepted by adventurers beneath platinum rank. You may recognize them as posing an *enormous* threat.”

“I see... Thank you.”

After Meigen’s explanation, a moment of silence dominated the area. So named monsters were for platinum ranks and above... Thinking back, Randrid, who was in Beaden now, was a platinum rank. Well, a retired platinum rank. He’d mastered the sword to a significant level, and it was rare to encounter anyone who could surpass him.

And Selna cleanly eliminated a hugely threatening named monster... She really is on a different level.

“By the way, Mr. Gardinant,” Nidus said, staring right at me. I could see the trust and zeal in his gaze.

“Yes, what is it?” I asked.

“Are you interested in becoming an adventurer?”

“No thank you.”

Instant rejection! I’m just a humble old man!

Selna Lysandra

My life began in the depths of despair. I was born the daughter of traders who traveled all over the world. Whenever we reached a big city, I was always left staring at the backs of my restless parents. It was a hectic childhood.

We never stayed in one place, so I never had anything like a friend—I wasn't particularly good at speaking with others to begin with. Each time we settled down in an inn, I felt the days lazily slip by, and my spirit did nothing but wane.

"You're such a good and obedient girl, Selna."

That was what my parents told me. I felt their love, but they were extremely busy with work to put food on the table. I probably spent far less time with my parents than any normal child should. Faintly, I even believed that I shouldn't get in my parents' way. It would've been nice if they'd ever seen my docility as a form of love.

During that period of my youth, we carried many goods from city to city and country to country, always accompanied by as few guards as necessary. However, those days met a sudden end.

"We're under attack! It's huge!"

I don't really remember what happened. I do recall the carriage suddenly shaking violently. People around me started moving in a hurry. A while later, roars and screams resounded in the air.

"Selna! Run!"

The last words I heard from my mother were steeped in grief and sorrow. She pushed me out of the partially destroyed carriage, practically flinging me away. Something big and terrifying loomed behind her. I didn't have the chance to get a good look at it, but its form was seared into my mind. Instinctive fear took over, and I ran away without any real destination in mind.

"Hey! Are you all right?!"

I had no idea how far I'd gone. Thinking back on it, I was surprised by the amount of stamina contained within my tiny body. Somehow, I reached the outer edge of a village in the countryside, far away from any trade routes. There, I was discovered by a villager.

I passed out after that, so I don't know what manner of discussion anyone had about me suddenly showing up. When I came to, I found myself in someone's house, looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling. My wounded body had been treated.

"Hey, you awake now?"

Don't follow strangers. That was what my mother had once told me. I could even picture the sour look on her face when she said it. Though I hadn't chosen my circumstances, I was now breaking this rule and bothering a complete stranger. Even my immature mind felt guilty about this. However, the most I could do as a child was keep my silence.

"What's your name?"

"Selna..."

The one who'd taken me in was very patient. I thoroughly ignored him, and the only thing he was able to pry out of me was my name. This was fairly rude, considering that he'd saved my life, but I couldn't bring myself to answer him when he asked me about what happened or what I was doing in the village. I didn't want to remember.

Thinking back on it now, I'm endlessly ashamed of my brazen refusal...but I was only a child.

After that, time passed idly by within the confines of that house. My parents never came to get me. Despite being so young, I somehow or other knew what had happened to them. The thing that had attacked my parents... It was so terrifying that even I knew how dangerous it was.

"What's this...?"

"A wooden sword. How about trying it out for a change of pace?"

How much time passed like that? One day, the man who was sheltering me

came to invite me outside. He held a wooden sword in his hand. That was when I first learned that this place was a swordsmanship dojo.

“Yeah, that’s the way! Ha ha ha, you’ve got a knack for this, Selna.”

I didn’t really have anything else to do, and I had calmed down somewhat. So, I did as he recommended and swung a wooden sword in the dojo. I didn’t particularly like this practice, nor did I hate it. Moving my body simply distracted me from doing nothing in an absentminded daze. Only now, as an adult, do I understand how much he’d worried about me; only now do I understand that swinging a sword was my childish way of trying to repay his consideration.

“You’re pretty nimble, Selna. Dual swords might suit you.”

During my three years in the dojo, I never had the chance to wield two swords, but strangely, his words stuck in my head. That must’ve been the first time in my life I actively devoted myself to something. I hadn’t had the time to do anything when I was with my parents, and I hadn’t wanted to trouble them with my selfish whims. But somehow or other—*really, just somehow or other*—I started to think that swordsmanship was pretty nice. Perhaps the sentiment was fueled by revenge, or escapism, or maybe even longing. What I felt back then faded away with time, but there was no mistaking that my teacher had opened up a path to the future.

“Selna, take care.”

Time passed, and I was entrusted to my adoptive parents. This exchange happened on a day like any other, and the somewhat old couple gazed at me affably.

From today onward, I wasn’t just Selna. I was going to be Selna Lysandra.

“Master.”

“Hm?”

He’d taught me how to use a sword, so I’d ended up calling him Master. Everyone else referred to him like that, so it didn’t feel out of place. For some reason, he gave me a weird look.

“Thank you...very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

In all likelihood, that was the first time I’d thanked him. How outlandish that it had taken me three years...but I shoved all my emotions into those few words.

My new parents were good people. They didn’t spoil me, but they weren’t strict. They simply let me grow. When I told them I wanted to be an adventurer, they were surprised but didn’t oppose it. The way they prayed for my safety made me feel so warm inside.

I wanted to become an adventurer for several reasons. My biological parents had traveled all over the world, so I also wanted to see the land with my own eyes. And, even if I’d only trained under my master for a short three years, I wanted to make use of my sword skills. I felt vaguely like I wanted to get stronger. If possible, I also wanted to save as many people as I could. *No one should have to go through what I did.*

All of these reasons might’ve been laughed off as childish dreams, but my parents didn’t object. That was how I became an adventurer for the sake of my own ego.

Time went on. I trained to become an adventurer and completed requests for the guild. During those days, I somehow or other figured out how amazing my master was. It bolstered my confidence to know that such a man had taught me—I was pushed to even greater heights.



“Huh? Um... Master...Beryl...?”

It was a shock—a tremendous shock. I’d become an adventurer, steadily working while tasting setbacks and facing them with unswerving determination. Before I knew it, I’d climbed my way to the top of the guild and earned the highest, strongest rank: black. *I made it.* I had my parents to thank for giving birth to a strong child, and my own humble efforts certainly couldn’t be discounted. However, I never forgot about the man who’d placed me at the starting line.

After about twenty years, he’d aged quite a bit. However, his virtues were as strong as ever, so I could still recognize him at a glance.

“I wanted to visit Beaden and report back to you, but once I started working as an adventurer, I was never blessed with the opportunity... I never thought we’d be reunited like this.”

When Master Beryl finally managed to remember me, I told him a half-truth. If I’d wanted to go see him, I could have. I had been busy with requests, but around platinum rank, I’d started earning plenty of income, more than enough to spare. Taking a carriage to Beaden would’ve been no big deal.

I was just too embarrassed. That had to be it.

Seeing him with Citrus of all people was beyond unexpected, though. My master, a special instructor for the knights? It was so unfair. I wanted him to instruct me too. Yet because I was already a black rank, I wasn’t in a position to ask others to teach me anymore. On the contrary, there was an overwhelming number of people that I had to train. Lately, there were also named monsters making strange moves, and then I had to consider the newcomers...

Right. Training newcomers. That would naturally require supervisors—extremely skilled ones.

“As a matter of fact, the adventurer’s guild would like to borrow Master Beryl. I’m here to get permission. I have a letter from the guildmaster too.”

I had twisted Nidus’s arm and heavily endorsed Master Beryl. With this request, I would be able to adventure with Master Beryl and witness his strength with my own eyes. *Take that, Citrus.* I didn’t really hate her or anything—she was a good person. However, I distrusted knights as a whole because of my childhood experience. The monster that’d attacked my parents had been rampaging on a trade route within national boundaries, which fell under the jurisdiction of the knightly order. Their responsibility was to ensure public safety—whether in urban areas or on trade routes—and they had failed.

“Just die already, you son of a bitch!”

“Gaaaaaah!”

Master Beryl’s sword pierced Zeno Grable’s mouth. *His skill certainly lives up to the image I have of him.* How many adventurers could truly keep up with his speed? Zeno Grable moved unbelievably fast for its large frame, but Master

Beryl had a perfect read on it. I never thought we'd meet a named monster out here, but Zeno Grable had horrible luck. It'd chosen to appear before me, and of all people, Master Beryl.

"You sure have made a mess, you bastard."

But you have my gratitude, Zeno Grable. You've allowed me to fight by Master Beryl's side. As thanks, I'll kill you in an instant. Rest in peace.

"Are you interested in becoming an adventurer?"

"No thank you."

After everything was over, we returned to the adventurer's guild. It took everything I had not to burst into laughter at the conversation between Nidus and Master Beryl. There was no way a man of Master Beryl's caliber could settle for being a mere adventurer. I thought it was ridiculous that he was considered a paltry "special instructor" or some such by the order. *Couldn't you prepare a better post for him, Citrus?*

As Master Beryl staunchly refused the guildmaster, I glanced his way casually.

Just as always, my master had an affable and kind face. If he continued playing an active role like this, then one day, everyone in the country—nay, the whole world—who aspired to master the sword would know his face...and his glorious title as swordmaster.

Epilogue: An Old Country Bumpkin Enjoys a Meal

“Welcome!”

The bell affixed to the door clanged cheerfully, announcing the arrival of a new customer. This spot—a tavern snugly tucked in a back alley of the central district—was a favorite of mine. I’d discovered it after settling down in Baltrain, and I tried to visit every now and then.

This was the capital, so it naturally had many restaurants. More people meant there was more business to be had, so shops of all shapes and sizes existed here. Among those were obviously all sorts of fancy places that nobles and bigwigs favored—places that looked awfully unsuited for an old man like me. Allusia had invited me to such establishments, but I’d casually declined. I was from the countryside, so I had no affinity for high society. As such, I couldn’t calm down in such high-class establishments. I found peace of mind in places like this: a tavern with a quiet atmosphere that was popular among the little people.

Upon opening the door, I saw several customers inside, chatting away at tables while enjoying their meals. I sat down at the far-left edge of the bar and placed an order with the cheerful young lady who greeted me.

“An ale, please.”

“Yes! One ale coming up!”

Having been to this tavern a few times now, this somehow felt like my regular seat. Of course, I sat elsewhere if it was already taken, but for some reason, it was usually available.

A drink tastes even better after a day of work. I wasn’t an alcoholic or anything, but I enjoyed nice booze. They say your tastes change with age, and my life was a perfect example of that—back in my younger days, I’d seen alcohol as nothing more than a bitter liquid. In that sense, I could really tell that I was getting on in my years. I wasn’t sure when exactly I’d started to like the

taste of alcohol, but maybe my palate was something I'd inherited from my dad. Taken in moderation, alcohol was refreshing and lifted the mood. And, after working up a good sweat, ale quenched my thirst in a totally unique way.

"Thank you for waiting! Here's that ale!"

"Thanks."

The waitress had come out from the back with a wooden tankard filled right to the brim. *Man, this is the life.* That sentiment might make me sound like a geezer, but there was no helping it. I loved this stuff. What's more, the ale here came with a side snack of nuts. I couldn't get enough. Salty nuts were the perfect pairing for a good ale. *All right, let's dig in.*

"Mgh... Mgh..."

I gave my thanks to the god of the harvest (*Do they even exist?*) as I chugged my tankard. The ale was nice and chilly.

"Pwah."

I wiped the foam from my mouth and took a breath. The bubbles popping in my throat felt great. *This golden glimmer quenches my thirst like nothing else in the world.* I followed up with a couple of nuts, which were crisp and firm. I chomped through them, and my mouth flooded with a fragrant flavor. *This is an altogether different sensation from the ale. Haah, I can't get enough.*

An ale's freshness had a huge impact on its aroma and taste, but I wouldn't expect any less from a tavern in the capital's central district. I certainly had no complaints about the quality. The combination of ale and nuts quickly left my palate enraptured, so I continued to snack and quickly chugged down my drink. Now, after settling in somewhat, I was just about ready to get a meal in me.

I'd come here right after training with the knights, so I was pretty hungry. The smell of cooking meat wafted from the back, making my mouth water even more. Choosing to order meat here was practically a given—it was thick, juicy, and well seasoned. I could easily imagine how good it would be to stuff my cheeks with roasted meat and wash it down with ale.

Yet...did I really want to make that choice without giving it a second thought? I was struck by sudden hesitation. The meat here was definitely delicious, there

was no doubting that, and I was more than hungry enough to finish whatever I ordered—I wasn't equipped with a stomach puny enough that it could be sated with nuts alone. But at the same time, meat was a *main dish*. It did, of course, depend on the type I ordered, but I felt like meat might be a little too heavy for a first course.

I glanced over the menu on the counter, planning my next move. The atmosphere was great, so while I was here, I figured I would enjoy it for a while longer.

"Excuse me," I said, waving over the cheerful young lady once again. "Grilled mushrooms, please. Ah, and a refill on ale."

"Yes! Coming right up!"

Baltrain was in the center of the country, so it naturally had a wide trade network. Even regional foods from the mountains could be found here in abundance. Mushrooms were great. They weren't as filling as meat, but they had a different consistency than vegetables. Biting into one filled the mouth with a unique umami that I found difficult to describe. And of course, I couldn't skimp on the ale either.

"Thank you for waiting! Grilled mushrooms!"

As I gulped at my second tankard of ale, staring vacantly at the empty dish of nuts, a plate of plump-looking grilled mushrooms was set in front of me. They were charred here and there, and a skewer ran through all of them.

"Hom..."

I took a bite without any seasoning first. *Mm, they're still hot... Perfectly cooked too.* After biting through the slightly crisp outer layer, umami immediately seeped out and danced across my tongue. *Delicious.*

I wasn't a gourmand or anything, but having good food was always better than having bad food—anyone would agree with that. I slathered my second bite with a generous serving of sauce. *Mm, it's just as good with the sauce.* I thought it was rather chic to enjoy a different flavor with every bite, so next, I had a bite with plenty of salt. This was also delicious.

Phew. Okay, it's about time I get my hands on some meat. I finished the grilled

mushrooms and placed my next order with the young lady.

“Excuse me. Sausage stew, please.”

“Coming right up!”

Roasted meat would be nice too, but I decided to go with stew. The Regen kebab shop I’d gone to with Kewlmy and Ficelle had been excellent, but I figured I’d treat myself to something more suited to sit-down dining. Ten or twenty years ago, I would’ve coveted a good hunk of meat, but my tastes had changed. I decided I wanted to juxtapose the cold ale in my belly with a nice hot stew.

“Here you go! Thank you for waiting!”

My sausage stew arrived. The large vegetable chunks in the broth looked splendid. *This really is a great restaurant—I’ll definitely have to add it to my regular rotation.* I ate a spoonful of stew. The meat and vegetables had melded perfectly, and this savory combination filled my mouth with joy. *Such a gentle flavor... My heart and stomach are satisfied.* The sausage’s mince was fine and tightly packed in the casing, and the moment I bit down, juices burst onto my tongue. I used the stew’s broth to wash it all down.

“Phew...”

Nuts, mushrooms, stew, and two tankards of ale. Did I want more...or was it better to stop here? *What a difficult decision.* I felt like I hadn’t gotten enough, yet also like I’d eaten just the right amount.

“Excuse me, can I get some bread?”

“Certainly!”

In the end, I ordered more. Maybe I was younger than I thought—I found myself unable to ignore the voice inside that wanted just one more bite. Freshly baked bread was good on its own, but dipping it in stew was simply exquisite. From ale to bread, this meal gave me a true appreciation for wheat. *What a terrific ingredient for sating humanity’s hunger.*

As I chewed on some stew-soaked bread, a person who appeared to be the restaurant’s owner walked over to me. He looked a little older than I was, though his neatly trimmed hair and beard looked very fresh. Also, the outer

edges of his eyes drooped somewhat, so he gave off the impression of a kind old man.

“You’ve been coming here a lot recently,” he said, striking up a conversation. “Did you just move to this neighborhood?”

“Yes, well, something like that.”

I didn’t hate chatting like this. It made me feel like a regular. Though I could hardly tell him that I’d been kicked out of my house by my dad, so I just answered his question noncommittally. Besides, it was hard to mention that I was the special instructor for the Liberion Order.

“Our Aida was pretty curious about you too. She keeps mentioning that a customer’s been coming around who really enjoys our food.”

The owner exchanged looks with the young lady who was currently serving a different table. I felt a little embarrassed that they’d been watching me like that. *Guess I put my country bumpkin side on full display...*

“Your daughter?” I asked. “She’s a very cheerful girl.”

“Ha ha ha! It’s all she has going for her, though.”

The conversation turned to the owner’s daughter, Aida. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail that flowed down to her shoulders and swayed about energetically behind her. She looked just around twenty years old, and the word “lively” described her perfectly. She went around cheerfully from table to table taking orders. Somehow or other, she reminded me of Kewlny...despite looking nothing like her.

“Aah, right,” said the owner. “Please have this if you’d like. My wife made it.”

“Ooh, how generous of you. I’ll gladly accept.”

The owner handed me a bag filled with bread. I was really grateful—it wasn’t like I was running out of money or anything, but being gifted good food had my spirits soaring. Relationships like this were so nice. This type of exchange had been pretty frequent with my neighbors out in the sticks, but forming a bond like this in the middle of the big city carried a different weight.

This man wasn’t a neighbor, but our meeting wasn’t a once-in-a-lifetime

encounter. I'd reconnected with all sorts of people here in Baltrain, like Allusia and Selna, but meeting new folks was also something to cherish. You never knew what connection might come in handy out in the world. And this connection had, in fact, already paid off in the form of great food.

Anyway, girls like Aida who were great at looking after others were lovely. Not that I was eyeing her or anything! My old man's words just suddenly flashed across my mind. *Looking for a wife, huh?* I hadn't given it any thought until now...but I wasn't allowed home until I did something about *that*. There wasn't much I could do when he kept pestering me for grandkids. Until I found a woman to be with, my dad would definitely keep bothering me. That damn geezer.

"That's all for me then," I said to the owner. "The check, please."

"Of course. Please come by again."

I settled the bill and stood up. It looked like some adventurers were sitting at a nearby table. They were all muscular, with sturdy builds, and they were chugging ale while stuffing their cheeks with meat. Aida interacted with them courteously. She wasn't very showy in the looks department, but there was a simplistic liveliness to her—it was like she shared her energy with everyone.

"Ah! Thank you very much!"

When Aida noticed that I was leaving, she graced me with a splendid smile.

"The food was great. Thanks."

"You're welcome! Please come again!"

After that pleasant farewell, I left the shop. Much like when I'd come in, the bell above the door chimed gently.

"What's this? Aida, is that kinda old guy your type?"

"J-Jeez! That's not how it is!"

Just before the door closed fully, I caught a snippet of the conversation between Aida and one of the adventurers (well, *probably* adventurers).

You damn youngsters. Think of better things to chat about! Like hell would a young girl hit on an old man like me. You're being a total nuisance to Aida. You

know women see you in a poorer light when you ask about stuff like that, right?

“Phew, I’m stuffed.”

I strolled down the capital’s streets on my own. The area wasn’t quite deserted, but seeing how late it was, there were very few people about. The night wind brushed against my cheek. After being warmed by the ale, the breeze felt incredible.

Anyway, that place is a wonderful hole in the wall. The owner and his daughter are nice people, and the food is delicious. From now on, I wanna eat there often.

“A wife, huh...?”

My mumbled words melted into the darkness. I wasn’t *pinning* for a wife or anything. At most, I thought it would be nice if I met a woman who I felt real compatibility with. I wasn’t proactively going around looking for one, though—I wasn’t that resourceful, and I doubted anyone would yearn for me as a man. *At this rate, am I ever going to be able to return home?* Honestly, it felt like it would be faster to try and convince my parents to let me back in.

“Well, it’ll work out one way or another.”

Things had fallen into place over the forty-five years of my life. I was sure that trend would continue from now on...setting aside whether I would actually ever find a sweetheart. *Crap, now I’m thinking like an old man.*

“Okay, back to the inn.”

At times like these, having a drink at the inn didn’t sound bad. I shifted my thoughts in that direction and picked up the pace. My voice and footsteps vanished into the nighttime ambience of the capital.



Afterword

It's a pleasure to meet everyone. I'm Shigeru Sagazaki.

Thank you very much for buying *From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman* volume 1. Many things came together to allow me to publish this series. Have you enjoyed it?

I'm writing this afterword in early February, but I still can't believe I've been published. I'm sure I'll continue not to believe it until I see a physical book for myself. And I might still feel this way even when it goes on sale. That is how rapidly things have been proceeding these last few months.

Now then, to put it very simply, I love ditzy characters. I don't mean that in an incompetent way, though. I like characters who have it together but are really dense in specific regards. The heroine of this series, Allusia, is an exact reflection of my tastes. She's gallant, tranquil, and ditzy in about a 4:4:2 ratio. Ditzy only takes up twenty percent of her personality, but that part isn't hidden at all. I hope all my readers can appreciate that aspect of her.

Also, I'm pleased to say that a manga version of this series has also been confirmed. It's being published by Akita Shoten. If you can, please enjoy that story as well.

Lastly, allow me to thank Tetsuhiro Nabeshima for the beautiful illustrations, my editor for courteously guiding me all the way to being published, and above all else, you, my wonderful readers, for picking up this book.

Thank you so much for reading. I hope we can meet again.

FROM OLD COUNTRY
BUMPKIN
TO **MASTER**
SWORDSMAN

My
Hotshot Disciples
Are All Grown Up
Now, and They
Won't Leave
Me Alone

1 Shigeru Sagazaki

Illustration

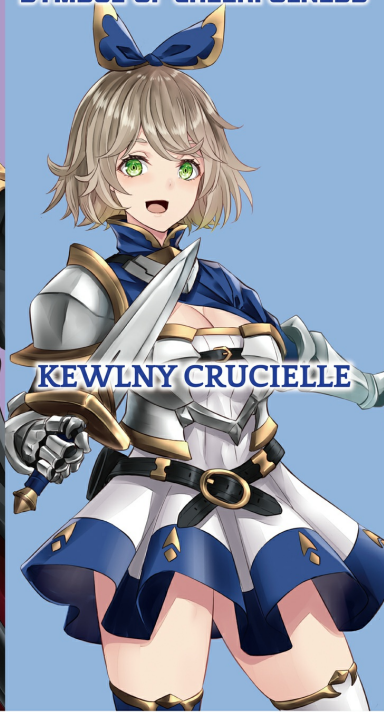
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

THE YOUNG ACE
OF THE MAGIC CORPS



FICELLE HABELER

THE LIBERION ORDER'S
SYMBOL OF CHEERFULNESS



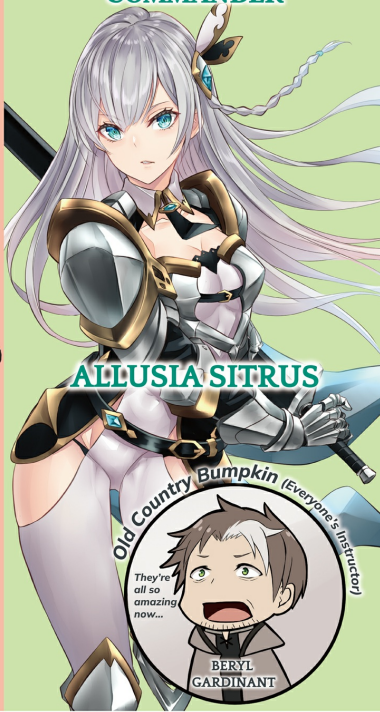
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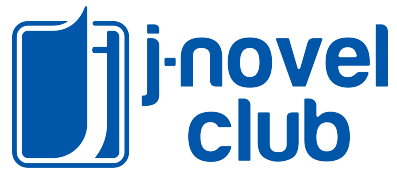


Old Country Bumpkin (Everyone's Instructor)
They're all so amazing now...
BERYL GARDINANT

Seriously, how did it come to this?
I'm just a boring old country bumpkin.
But at this point,
it's not like I could do anything to stop the challenge.
I had to, at the very least, put in enough effort
to avoid humiliating myself if I lost.

Concentrate.





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From Old Country Bumpkin to Master Swordsman: My Hotshot Disciples Are All Grown Up Now, and They Won't Leave Me Alone Volume 1

by Shigeru Sagazaki

Translated by Hikoki Edited by C.D. Leeson

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KATAINAKA NO OSSAN, KENSEI NI NARU～TADA NO INAKA NO
KENJUTSUSHIHAN DATTA NONI, TAISEI SHITA DESHITACHI GA ORE WO
HOTTEKURENAI KEN vol. 1

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